



THE TOWER

THE TOWER

ART AND LITERARY MAGAZINE

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The Tower

University of Minnesota
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The Tower is the art and literary magazine of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. We publish the best in art and creative writing by undergraduate students in the state of Minnesota.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Humanity has historically tiptoed the line between the physical world and the virtual realm. Recently, the lines between these spaces have become increasingly blurred, and our experience as humans has been irrevocably altered. This is to say, now, more than ever, artists are experiencing the effects of this shift, and asking themselves, what is real, and what is not? In this edition of *The Tower*, we asked our contributing artists, writers, and poets: Where do you draw the line between “Virtual / Reality”? Are these experiences mutually exclusive?

In response to our call to creatives in higher education across Minnesota, we heard the voices of humanity scream out in appreciation of Reality—our physical, here and now. These pages echo their passion for nature, friendship, and family. Our contributors have also opened the door to the world of the Virtual—a new state of existence brought forth by technology. They have explored their own conceived realities of AI, video games, and our relationships with and through screens.

In support of the creative work of our contributors is the steadfast dedication of the students who put together this edition of *The Tower*. Though we assumed a management role and made decisions when the time came, every member of our team—from our editors and copyeditors to our designers and artists—brought to life an aesthetic of what is real, what is virtual, what we cannot say for sure is either, and where we draw the line (if any) between the two.

We hope this magazine represents this moment in time, this epochal shift—where art exists in and between the ethereal and the material. Let this be a physical reminder that we were here, that these feelings and experiences were real, before we slip further into the world of the virtual.

Sincerely,



Tallulah Bacon



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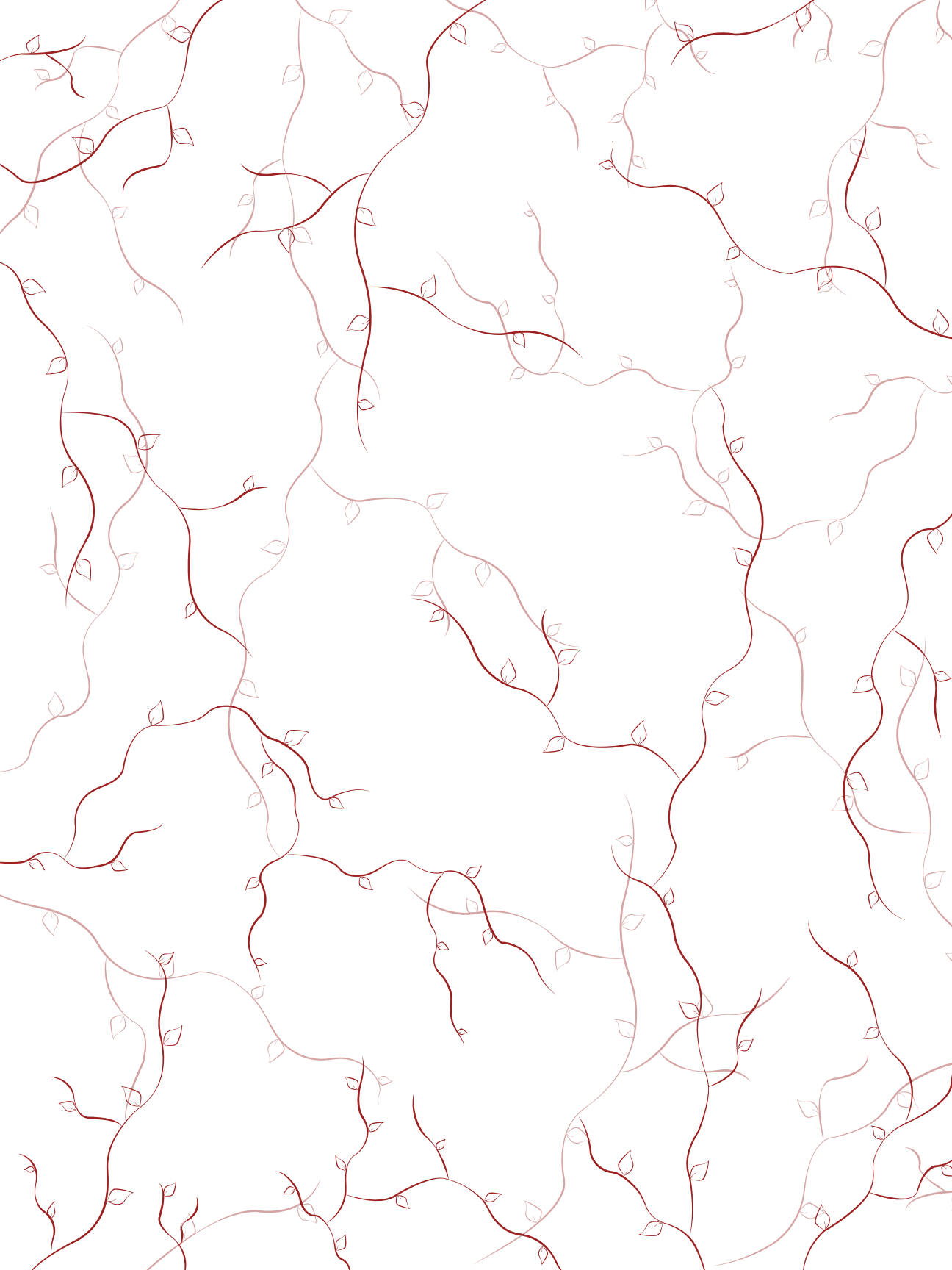


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THIS SERVES AS YOUR NOTICE

William Farley

Dear Mx. Alex Levron,

This serves as your notice that we have declined your request for an appeal on the grounds of your extenuating circumstances. We understand that you were hospitalized during the window in which we requested comment from you in your case, but out of a deep sense of equity and fairness, we do not allow for exceptions in the appeals procedure. You should consider this matter closed.

As you have mentioned your disability as a source for these extenuating circumstances, I must remind you that, per our Mandatory Medical Withdrawal Policy, we may reassess your continued participation in the university community.

However, you can rest assured that neither the decision to review your continued participation in the university community, nor the above decision, were made based on speculation, stereotypes, generalizations, or in an arbitrary manner.

Yours in Solidarity,

Dr. Aaron T. Blake, Esq. PhD (he/him/his)*†

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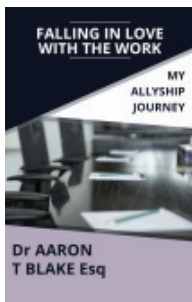
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Board of Directors of the Allyship Foundation | Building Understanding of Difference & Driving Cohesive Professional Communities

Author of Falling in Love with the Work

Follow my substack:

DrAaronTBlakeEsq.Substack.com

***Why share pronouns?** Because not sharing them perpetuates harmful assumptions about the knowability of someone else's gender(s). Learn more about pronouns at https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/qa_faqs/what-are-some-commonly-used-pronouns

/† You can learn more about my specific gender construction here en.pronouns.page/@DrAaronTBlakeEsq

Schedule an Appointment with Me:

Advising appointments by email only

Office Hours for Students in My Classes Only: Mondays 8:30-9:30 am, in-person only

Accommodation Needs:

We are committed to providing a comfortable, inclusive, and respectful environment for all members of our community. If there is information you feel would be helpful for us to know, including disability or other accommodation needs, I invite you to share it with me directly, or let the front desk know when you schedule an appointment.

Basic Needs Resource Document:

Students facing basic needs insecurity are valid, worthy, and deserving of help. Please know that you are not alone, and there are resources available. You can find helpful information and assistance [here](#).

Academic Support Resources:

Needing academic support is completely normal and valid—many students face challenges not because of their abilities, but due to systemic barriers and societal injustices perpetuated within academic



environments. Whether you're navigating structural inequities, struggling with a specific subject, or feeling overwhelmed, there are resources to help. Explore academic support options [here](#), and know that seeking help is a powerful way to advocate for yourself. General campus resources can be found [here](#).

Mental Health Matters

Your mental health is just as important as your academic success, and it's okay to ask for help when you need it. Many students face stress, anxiety, or other challenges, often made worse by societal pressures and inequities that can feel overwhelming in academic spaces. You are not alone, and there are resources available to support you. Explore mental health services and tools [here](#), and remember that prioritizing your well-being is not only valid but essential.

Diversity is our Strength

Our community thrives on diversity, and each person's unique background, experiences, and perspectives enrich our shared environment. Acknowledging and addressing systemic inequities that affect marginalized groups is essential to building an inclusive and equitable space for all. We encourage everyone to celebrate their identity, advocate for equity, and engage with resources designed to support and uplift underrepresented communities. Learn more about diversity and inclusion initiatives [here](#) and how we can continue growing together.

Academic Integrity

Promoting academic integrity is crucial for fostering a fair and equitable learning environment for all students. It's important to recognize that upholding honesty in your work also means actively challenging the systemic barriers and biases that affect marginalized communities in academia.

This includes acknowledging the academic work of black, brown, womxn, LGBTQ, and marginalized people that often goes overlooked. Academic integrity is about respect for all voices and knowledge—learn more about academic standards [here](#).

Consider the Environment Before Printing

Environmentalism is not only about protecting the planet, but also about addressing the systemic inequalities that disproportionately impact marginalized communities. Environmental racism refers to the



way low-income communities and communities of color often bear the brunt of pollution, climate change, and environmental degradation. It's crucial that we work toward sustainability and justice for all, ensuring that everyone has access to a healthy environment. Learn more about environmental justice and how you can make a difference [here](#).

Build Community & Solidarity

Finding community is crucial for navigating the academic journey, especially in spaces where systemic inequities can create additional challenges. A strong, supportive community helps provide the resilience and belonging needed to succeed, offering both solidarity and resources to overcome obstacles. As your academic advisor, I encourage you to seek out communities that affirm your identity, advocate for justice, and uplift one another in the face of adversity. You are not alone in this journey. You can find resources [here](#).

Land, Water, Plants, Sky, and Stars Acknowledgment

[I acknowledge](#) that Woodside College stands on the unceded land of *Miní Sóta Makhóche*, the homelands of the [Dakhóta Oyáte & Ojibwe](#). This acknowledgment is only one step within the process of restorative justice which must be followed up with through action centered on the voices and needs of indigenous peoples.

Educate Yourself

Understanding and addressing injustice is a vital part of creating a more equitable world. I encourage you to educate yourself about systemic inequalities and their impact on marginalized communities. Learning is the first step toward meaningful change. Explore resources and tools to deepen your understanding and take action [here](#).





PURGATORY
Noah Uphus
photograph

PHANTOM LOVE

DANIELLE GALLUS

When the air is steady and the dreams come weary.
A howl will sound.
The hour of the wolf,
Awoken ready,
Awoken parlous.

Why ever assume our archfiend has come to save?
A phantom love, captioned only by a grave.
Where the tower becomes secluded,
Where the oculus, the one true eye, is found,
Will you in due time, escape ruins, become crowned?

Air begins to twist, its hands unclench, now holding up deathly daggers.
It's when you see *him*, Carved and craving.
Do you, sweet slivered soul, really need saving?

Spires sharp,
You are vaulted too.
An ill-fated thing,
holding onto last gasps.

The clock chimes, for it is time. An end. You will sink,
You will descend.



THE NIGHT FLOORS

DJ SCHEELE

On the ninth floor of the Bellerose apartment building, the clocks tick backwards.

6:45 PM

As she escaped the city streets, Harriet exhaled a breath that had been caught in her chest for days. Golden rays poured through the windows, pitching long lazy shadows on the hardwood of the lobby. *Welcome back.* She crossed to the stairway and started up the flight. The maroon carpet wrinkled under her boots. The wallpaper simmered. The building hummed in excitement.

She stopped at the third floor and stepped into a barren hallway. A single narrow corridor, five doors to a side. Their numbers faded and cracked: 301, 310, 302, 309— She stopped at 303. Inside the peephole, a tiny kaleidoscope of particles danced. She grasped the handle, felt its warm bronze finish, and pushed open the door to a crumbling apartment.

Mold crept in every corner, dust shrouded every surface. A shattered grandfather clock decayed against the back wall. A moth-eaten red sofa stood in the center of the room, stained by the sun. But, what really commanded attention, were the clusters of candles spotting the floor. Each group of waxy warts were burnt down to their wicks. They huddled together in yellowing stacks, waiting for their turn to glow again. Electricity in the Bellerose had been shut off for years.

Last time, Harriet left the window open to let in fresh city air, but the festering odor persisted. That greasy must collected on her skin, a mixture of pus and honey. The breeze pushed and pulled on floating specks suspended in the air. A dreary inhale and exhale of an ancient being. Despite its nauseating presentation, the room held a quiet comfort. *Just how I left it,* she thought.

Harriet opened the bathroom door. Its interior matched brilliantly with the rest of the home. She twisted the faucet. It sputtered at first, spitting out a brownish bile, before clearing up to something similar to water. She stoppered the sink and crossed to the window as it filled.

Outside, the city moaned. Millions of souls wandered aimlessly: a couple rushing to catch their bus; an old man struggling to stand from a bench; a sea of bodies spilling out from the subway; a child, alone, trying to cross the bustling street. From somewhere down the block, a siren echoed. *Nothing out there is more real than what's in here.*

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Harriet twisted the tap and the water ceased. A cool, cloudy mystery. She tied her hair into a tight bun and took off her jacket. The water swirled. Harriet looked into the mirror. *Whose eyes are these?* she wondered. *Whose nose? Whose lips?* She looked so tired. She gripped each side of the countertop. *Only a moment.* She dunked her face into the sink. Water splashed over the edge, soaking her socks and pooling on the tiled floor. The clocks switched—

7:00 PM

Harriet inhaled as hard as possible. Water ripped through her lungs like a dull razor. She forced a second breath, a violent solid mass moving through her fragile airways, scraping its own channel. She needed to vomit: the water wanted out. It leaked through her nose. Her heartbeat pounded in the corner of her vision. She sucked down another mouthful of water. A merciful black crept through her mind, dulling her senses, numbing the agony...and just before consciousness gave way, warm hands passed over her shoulders and guided her from the sink.

Everything was rose and lilac. The figure placed Harriet on a cushion of satin. Her vision was a wash of watercolor. Burgundy rugs and ornate candelabras and lush bouquets. On the wall hung *The Birth of Venus*, surrounded by a golden frame. She slipped in and out of the world. Her eyes rose and fell. Time was a vast sea and she floated on the current. Sunlight sparkled upon the water.

Finally, she awoke. The grandfather clock rang—

MIDNIGHT

Before her eyes were even open, she heard the music. It bled through the ceiling, coming from above. A soft clarinet sang the opening to George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." The melody warbled in her ears. She stood as if picked up by the notes themselves. A smile melted onto her face. Unlatching the front door, the apartment opened to an elevator. Harriet stepped inside. The machine took off; it already knew where to go.

Harriet's vermillion gown looked particularly lovely that night. It shimmered with every swish. As she ascended, the symphony grew louder. Art-deco designs adorned the walls—twinkling with the music as it reverberated down the elevator shaft. Anticipation built in Harriet's throat. The elevator vibrated. She fluttered her eyelashes and felt the weight of mascara. The machine stopped with a chime: Floor Nine. "Rhapsody's" low brass thundered a welcoming chord. The door opened.

"Good evening, Miss," said the bellhop, "We are so glad you could join us." The bellhop was a small gentleman in an extremely dapper tuxedo. He wore a toothy smile that appeared bigger than possible. Harriet took his gloved hand and the two broke out in a run.



He guided her through halls of celebration. Streamers twirled through the air. Gold balloons hovered about the floor. Laughter and clinking glasses filled the twisting maze of carpet and shining tungsten bulbs. All of Harriet's friends beamed at her around corners and through framed windows:

"Welcome, once again."

"How do you do?"

"You look absolutely dashing."

"The Host is so pleased you will be joining us tonight."

A familiar sunny sweetness enveloped her. Her resolve began to thaw. Inhibitions discarded, left on floor three. The bellhop stopped abruptly, as did "Rhapsody in Blue." They stood before the grand entrance to the ballroom: two massive mahogany doors. The bellhop turned, tears welling in his eyes, "The Host has been waiting so long for your return, Miss."

He pulled open the left door with a bow. Light spilled out, extending its hand to the guest of honor. The golden glow that she longed for; the buzzing numbness that washed away everything cold and ugly. Harriet thanked the bellhop with a curtsy, then entered.

An eruption of sound and color greeted her. A band ignited in the corner. Waiters rushed about with trays of warm desserts and fresh pastries, chilled drinks with salted rims, spiral garnishes, and sculpted ice. The enormous room contained an open wooden floor where couples swayed. Tables of refreshments lined the walls. Shimmering lights illuminated the dance floor and candles burned at intimate tables. Harriet was overcome by the sensations, taking in the spectacle. She couldn't focus on any particular thing—it was all too marvelous, too wonderful. The lights, the music, the decor, the—

"Excuse me, Miss. Could I have this dance?"

A voice from behind. Harriet nodded. Without a second word, strong arms whisked her away as the band struck up a waltz. She spun and glided about the floor as her partner confidently guided her through the room. Their soft skin brushed hotly against hers. The two dominated with flourish and finesse. Harriet couldn't resist a smile. Her partner laughed; she followed suit. The ballroom crescendoed into a cacophony of cheers. In a final punctuated move, Harriet spun three revolutions and dropped into a chair, expertly placed by her partner just as the music rang out its final chord. Applause. *It's all still here. Thank you, oh god, thank you.*

As the evening faded and the clocks began to steal time, Harriet drank, ate, and told stories with friends. She dined on sweet and savory flavors that mingled about her tongue: succulent meats, steaming vegetables, fluffy cakes. Harriet's dancing



partner sat to her left, gunning her gorgeous glances throughout the night. It was all so perfectly planned.

But of course, just as summer gives way to fall. Trees shed their leaves. Rain turns to snow. Ice melts in the sun. And flowers are born anew. Time always slipped away when Harriet wasn't looking. It seemed the same part of her mind that feared, obsessed, and worried was also in charge of temporal perception. So, as it blurred, so did time.

The clock ticked backwards and the night drew thin. A friend told a joke. The table burst into laughter. Then—

7:00 PM

The world turned over. Everyone froze. Harriet was left laughing in a room of silence. She looked at her partner; they sat unblinking, shivering slightly. *Already?* She pushed up from the table and started for the ballroom doors. Dozens of cautious eyes followed her, pretending to be invisible.

A door creaked from behind. Harriet spun around. A presence swished in, veiled in darkness. Sharp shadows and muted colors followed. And then, a voice—bottomless and acidic—whispered in her ear.

“It’s been so long, Harriet.”

His hand enveloped her shoulder, the grip unrelenting. Her energy waned as a wave of frost descended through her body. The room flickered; her eyelids drooped. Suddenly, his grip loosened. Seizing the opportunity, Harriet twisted violently, shaking from the grasp. Ready to bolt toward the exit, Harriet glanced over her shoulder, but saw nothing.

“Silly girl.”

The hand returned, squeezing tighter as long fingers crept towards her neck. They pressed against blood vessels, muting the flow of oxygen to her brain. He clutched her earring with another hand, his bony finger caressing the glimmering emerald. Before long, helium began to enter her head. The world felt far away. Harriet was pulled backward on a string. It slowly tugged at the nape of her neck, widening her perception. Reality played at half speed. A light caught Harriet’s dazed attention. It blinked off and on. Off and on. Off and on. Finally, from a distance, he spoke.

“Harriet, this is all mine. You know that.”

Darkness passed over her vision for a moment. With the return of light, Harriet saw the world for what it had always been: a theater of puppets frozen in mechanical postures. Synthetic hearts thundering away in hollow shells. Dizzying lights and molding plates of rotten food. A band of grating noise. It was all piercing and unfamiliar.

“If you want to play along, don’t make me wait forever.”



In an instant, a violent gust of wind tore from the ballroom. Glasses rattled, fabric rippled, chandeliers swayed. The Host exited. The room returned to the brilliance she knew.

Harriet looked at the clock:

6:52 PM

A wet, stifled sob arose from the corner of the ballroom. It was the bellhop. Despite his efforts to contain it, a high-pitched wail forced its way out through his mouth, eyes, and nose. He was doubled over, no bigger than a toddler. Harriet slowly backed towards the door, watching the poor man. His body shook with each ragged breath. Emotion tore out of him on its own accord. Harriet bumped into the door. A hollow thud echoed throughout the room. The crying stopped and the bellhop turned. Puffy red eyes and a snotty nose met her, yet he still wore a magnificent smile.

“Could I interest you in some refreshments, Madam? It’s really quite early. No need to leave yet.” The man rose and slunk toward her. “The celebration has just begun, and everyone is so happy you are here.” Every party-goer stared in her direction, all with a deadpan loathing behind their features. “Please, sit back down. There is no reason to leave,” continued the bellhop, wiping away snot. Harriet reached for the door.

Tears poured from the man, but there was something else. His face itself seemed to melt. The skin sagged and ran down his chin, then his vest, splashing onto the floor. The bellhop held his face, trying to save his features from washing away. The once kind faces of her friends and lovers also began to seep into grotesque, fleshy versions of what they once were.

Harriet pulled open the door and left.

“Wait!” called the bellhop, as his steps advanced from behind, the facade slipping. “Don’t-don’t go! Look what you’re doing to us, you-you BITCH!”

6:49 PM

As she stumbled down the hall, her gown began to itch. The feeling crept slowly throughout her body like a swarm of beetles skittering along her skin. It was unstoppable; twitching against every nerve. Harriet scratched at her arms and legs in vain. Behind her, the party-goers followed in ravenous pursuit.

“Stop, please! Don’t leave...” the bellhop whined through his sloppy mess of a mouth. The group rounded a corner. Harriet tried to run, but her limbs wouldn’t cooperate. The itch was so severe her muscles spasmed, desperately relearning how to walk. She scratched and tore at her arms and chest and legs and neck, splitting open her fragile skin. Even as hot blood poured out of her wounds, the itch only intensified.



6:47 PM

Harriet continued down the unending hallways, raking nails against her body as the crowd snarled. Streamers and balloons obscured the path ahead and condensed in the narrowing hall. Faces melting like wax appeared in doorways and windows.

“Help us, oh god, help us...”

“Please! Please don’t go!”

“You’re killing us!”

The cries echoed in her mind as the itch commanded her senses. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, offering one last push. She rounded a corner and there it was: the elevator. She tore down the hall, blocking out the screams, the suffocating balloons, the itch. In a final effort to stop her, the walls closed in. Balloons popped like gunshots in her ears. Bodies crunched together behind her. She fought against the friction as the hall squeezed, begging her to stay. The pressure forced air from her lungs. Blood built behind her eyes. She was an overstuffed doll, ready to burst at the seams.

Just before her chest collapsed, Harriet tumbled into the elevator.

6:45 PM

Breathe. Just breathe. She closed her eyes and let her heartbeat steady. The itch subsided. The cries of agony faded. Harriet turned, expecting to see a solid wall, but she was greeted by the hallway; quiet, untouched. The bellhop stood at the end of the passage with wide eyes, like a child. His face was practically gone. He blinked. An eyelid dripped. Then, he crumpled, splattering onto the carpet. The door closed.

The elevator lazily rumbled along as Harriet descended from floor nine. Lights hummed a mundane melody, and the world stood still. With each floor she passed, relief blanketed her mind. Harriet never realized how exhausted she was. Until now, being tired wasn’t an option. She sat on the floor, hugging herself and taking in the much needed calm. Then, however, something happened that had never happened before.

The elevator stopped.

The lights flickered for an instant, as a familiar darkness cascaded upon her. The room blurred into a plane of hazy shadow, a fuzzy gray that stretched to the horizon. Slowly, images of street lamps, dim buildings, stars, and clouds fused into the scene, all in monochrome contrast. She sat on a bench, in the ghost of a city. Someone spoke.

“Baby, you can’t keep doing this.”

Harriet didn’t turn, she already knew who it was.

“I know you *need* this. But, please be more careful.”



Harriet exhaled a cloud of vapor that floated into the atmosphere.

"You say 'never again,' but we both know that's impossible."

The duality of The Host never quite made sense to her.

"See you soon, Harriet."

Street lights faded and the world folded in on itself. Skyscrapers shrunk to telephone booths, streetlights became candles. It all happened so fast. Harriet tried to stand, but her legs gave out. She fell forward toward the concrete. Air rushed past her ears, the solid ground approaching. She braced for impact, but as her nose connected with the sidewalk... she passed right through.

Harriet fell inside an endless nothing, void of air or light or warmth. Were her eyes open or closed? Nausea crept its way into her throat, a swelling hot pressure. She plummeted, end over end, unsure when she would hit the ground or if she would ever stop descending. *What does one do when presented with infinity?*

Suddenly, she snapped, as if a rope tied around her waist finally ran out of slack. Her body contorted, then she was back.

12:00 AM

Harriet vomited up cloudy sink water and collapsed to the grimy bathroom floor. The first thing she heard was the city: droning, alive. She felt like a washcloth wrung dry, twisted and hollow. Sweat stains covered her jeans and torn flannel; her hair, broken free from the bun, was matted in gnarled patches. The door to the main room was ajar, revealing the city's fluorescent glow through the window, which lingered upon the patchy popcorn ceiling. *It had never been this violent.*

12:01 AM

A siren wailed in the streets below. The noise ricocheted off buildings, reaching high into the inky night. Placing a hand on the tub for support, Harriet stood, shaking, and crossed to the open window. The siren had no visible origin. It was a constant of the city, as vital as the streetlights and the vines clinging to broken brick walls, the glare of apartment windows, the smell of trash wafting in waves, the honking horns, and the people. The many people. It was a wailing that, no matter how long, never seemed to vanish.

12:02 AM

Harriet trudged to the moth-eaten couch and curled up on it. Her head drummed a swirling stew of emotion that bubbled and burned. She let the sweet mercy of sleep take her away.

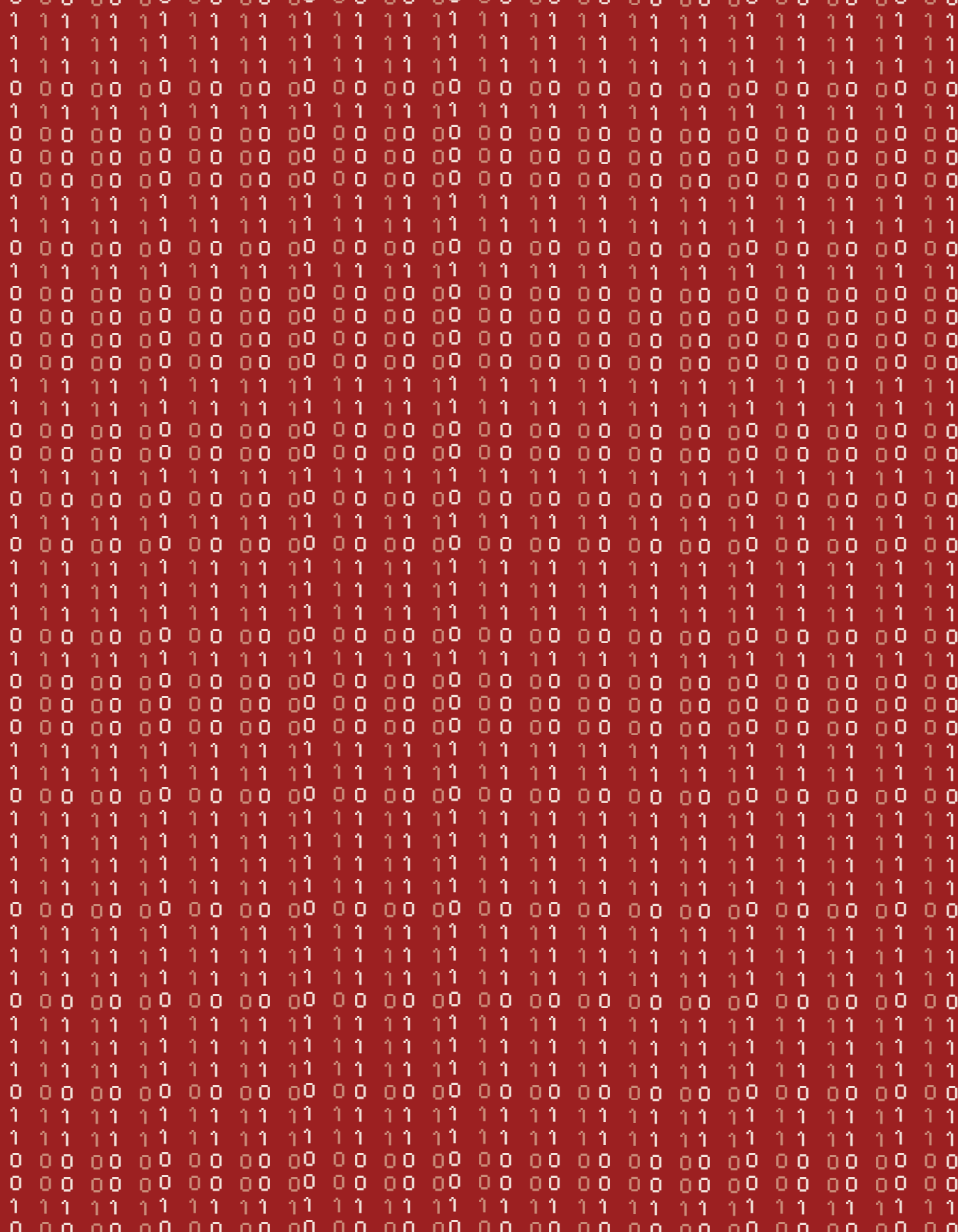
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and on...







UNTITLED 4
Soleil Anthony
mixed media

STITCH BY STITCH

MADELYN VALENTINO

In a world of pieces, parts, and magic, Seven was born.

Seven was the seventh of seven, the last to be created, and the finest piece of work Dr. Mirney had ever made.

Seven was made of nine parts. Nine that they knew of, at least. It was painful to run their hands down their legs, achingly far, the effort stretching at stitches, fingers tracing the outline of angered seams. Maybe, they thought, there was more inside, but Mirney would never tell.

There was no shortage of parts in the world. The charnel houses and morgues were filled to the brim and poorly patrolled, so it was easy for Mirney to sneak in, again and again, for One through Six, all of whom Dr. Mirney spoke poorly of, lamenting what they could've been. Seven had never met the six before them, and Mirney was loath to speak of them in a way that would quell the curious beating of Seven's heart.

What Seven knew of their siblings was as little as it was sad. One didn't live long after creation—a necropsy had revealed a pocked skull that Mirney had missed, indicative of tuberculosis, which had blasted through the lower streets only months before.

After that, Dr. Mirney knew he had to be more careful about the parts he picked. He'd only look for the freshest of bodies, hauling them back to his lab in the dead of night to ensure they'd be the best match. Circumstances still forced him to take the bodies from the lower streets—the uppers were more protective of their dead, harvesting what they could of their post-mortem magic and burning the rest.

With each failure, Mirney withdrew further into his madness and mutterings. He refused to tell Seven about Five and Six, the pain of their losses too fresh.

For Seven, Mirney knew he needed to get creative. The bodies of the unwanted would still have to do—it was all he had access to—so he started to watch. He roamed the streets at night, noting where the Ferrymen grabbed the bodies from, memorizing faces and establishments. Dr. Mirney would trail the Ferrymen and watch as they dumped cart after cart of bodies that no one was coming to collect. Then, in the quiet seclusion of the night, he'd sort through the bodies with at least some idea of who his parts were coming from.

It took months. It wasn't easy to preserve body parts, either. Ice was expensive and

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Dr. Mirney was, to most people, unemployed. His jobs came few and far between but paid well when they did.

Between jobs, he sat with Seven.

Mirney's lab—Seven's world—consisted of four stained walls, locked cabinets, and a metal worktable bolted to the floor in the center of the room. It was there that Seven sat, slept, ate, and thought, memorizing every inch of the room. Every growing crack in the ceiling, every label on the bottles tucked cautiously behind glass cabinets, every muffled laugh from children far outside.

Occasionally, perhaps when the guilt began to eat away at him, Mirney would drop off books for Seven. *The Wolf Around the Way. Nettle's Adventures in Calafinax: Volume I. A Beginner's Biography of the Peoples of Pindry.*

Eventually, though, the words ran out, and Seven was again left waiting for their maker's return.

"It'll be months before I even think of letting you outside," Mirney said, running reverent hands over Seven's body, checking his handiwork. "Your limbs can reject you at any time in the months after surgery. I can't take that risk. If you're here with me, I can check on you every day."

Seven cleared their throat, and Mirney handed them a glass of water before they could speak. He waited for them to sip before accepting the glass back and resuming his work.

"Can I look in the mirror today?"

The mirror, which Seven knew of only from the books Mirney brought them, was a fantastical thing, a piece of forbidden knowledge that Mirney would've rather stayed a secret. The first time Seven had asked, Mirney had stumbled through a lie, claiming that mirrors were luxuries that men like himself could not afford.

This time, familiar with the question, Mirney's hands only slowed, caressing the same tender spot above the stitches on Seven's outer knee.

He looked at Seven's face, and they could not meet his eyes. Mirney took Seven's chin in hand, turning it to the left and right, taking in every blemish and blush. "I don't want you to be frightened," he told them. "I think you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Your skin shines, even in this light. And your hair," he paused, thumbing a curl, "it frames your face perfectly. Eyes like stained glass, broken into all these little colors."

Seven looked up and met Mirney's gaze. His eyes were a plain brown. If they tried hard enough, they swore they could see themselves—a faint shape, distorted and sullen, in the reflection there. It wasn't enough.

"Next time I'll bring a mirror, okay?" Mirney told them. Seven knew he would not.



The next time came, and all Mirney brought with him was a deep frown.

"Your leg doesn't look so good," he told Seven. They knew. The pain coming from the distended stitches right below their knee was white hot. They could barely move the limb for fear it would fall clean off, severing bone and all.

"Lay back and I'll look at it," he instructed Seven. With little other choice, they followed.

The table on which they'd been born—created, sewn, constructed—was cold, hard metal. It bit at Seven's bare skin, which was everywhere. Mirney wanted easy access, nothing to interfere with the healing process, nothing to pull or snag or irritate. At most, Seven was allowed a loose outer robe, a blanket to pull tight around themselves on the colder nights spent in the lab. The lights above the table blinded Seven, so they closed their eyes and let Mirney's puttering, the sounds of him grabbing gauze and antiseptic and tweezers, drown out the panic that was bubbling up their throat.

"Tell me about the leg," Seven spoke.

"I think it's rejecting," Mirney answered. Seven could feel the cautious wipe of gauze over the wound, the antiseptic stinging, working.

"No," Seven stopped him. "Who's it from?"

The wiping stopped. Started again. Mirney heaved a sigh, breath ghosting over Seven's sensitive skin. "Why do you want to know?"

"I feel," Seven swallowed. "Strange. It's like I can feel them all separately. And I don't know which parts of me are *me*. I want to know."

"The others asked too," Mirney answered. In their head, Seven could picture six bodies, bleak figures, mostly shapeless, amalgamations of lives just as Seven was. "And I've never been able to come up with an answer."

"Why not the truth?" Seven asked.

Distantly, Mirney brought his scissors to Seven's knee, snipping a stitch. "It's an ugly one."

Seven drew in a breath. They wanted the pain to be over, for the bright lights of the lab to be switched with the warmth of the sun, the hard table beneath them traded for a bed of grass. "An ugly truth for what you say is a beautiful thing. Is that not what you'd consider a success? Am I not your greatest creation?"

Instead of answering, Mirney moved to cut another stitch. Seven grabbed his wrist, stopping him. The strength in their grip was impossible, and a chill spread down Mirney's arm like frost in the night.

Mirney sighed. "I'll put the scissors down."

Seven released their grip and motioned for Mirney to continue. "I remember every single one. Every person I've ever brought back here and made anew."

Anew.

"This leg?" Mirney said. "You really want to know where it came from? So you can look in the mirror and know who died for you?"

The leg in question seemed to pulse at the mention of its previous owner. That, or the infection was flaring up.

Seven bit down their remark, straining to keep from grabbing at Mirney again, and answered, "Yes."

"A whore on Bremont Street. Pretty, with a mole under her eye. I don't know what killed her but she was of no use to anyone dead. So I took her."

The way he spoke of the woman wasn't demeaning, but straightforward. Clinical. She really was nothing more to him than a body. Seven eyed the row of stitches where Mirney had been operating. That was where the heat radiated from, where it crawled out the cracks and begged to be made well.

"I'm sure you're going to ask about this one next," Mirney said before Seven could speak, motioning to their other leg, where the stitches were higher, above the kneecap, where there was more muscle and hair. "Teenage boy. Killed while messing around with his friends after they'd just gotten into the Guard. Upper body injuries only. Not a perfect match to the other leg, I know, but the best I could do. You might walk with a limp for a while, but there's nothing that can't be fixed."

That leg, too, ignited with feeling, a wave of warmth creeping from toe to thigh.

Seven pushed themselves to their elbows, towering over Mirney's seated position, and glanced down at the man, head cocked in question. A simmering anger had settled in their heart while hearing Mirney speak, the disregard with which he recalled the lives of those he'd used.

"And what about *me*?" Seven asked. "The me in *here*?" Pale skin, stained glass eyes, brown curls. Seven tapped their temple softly with two fingers.

"It was a complicated procedure," Mirney said. "The brain is so delicate. Intimate. Never transfers properly, which is why you can't remember the others."

Six bodies—faint at the edges, bleeding into nothingness.

"What are you saying?" Seven asked. That wave, that tingling warmth, licked up their spine and caressed the edges of their brain, pooling in the sulci like fog settling over a swamp.

"It's always been *you*," Mirney clarified. "Host by host, stitch by stitch, I'm doing this for you."

Seven shook their head. Damp curls obscured their vision. Obscured Mirney from view, whose gaze was so adamantly focused on Seven.

They were Seven, the seventh, made of nine. How many had it taken before



them? How many would come after?

"It hurts," was all Seven could say, and it was the truth.

"I know, I'm sorry. But each time I'm closer to getting it right. And then you'll be whole again."

Body to body, struggling to find a home.

"Who was I?" Seven asked.

Mirney shook his head no. It was a question he wouldn't answer.

Hands to eyes, pressed hard into sockets; the perfect imitation of grief drew Mirney closer. His arms fell around Seven as they had many times before, though Seven couldn't remember any time before this, pulling them into a tight embrace. Seven allowed their hands to fall away from their eyes, around Mirney, carving a path slowly closer to the pan where he'd laid his scissors to rest.

They were the seventh of seven, the last to be created, the finest piece of work Dr. Mirney would ever make.





REFLECTION OF A MONSTER
Kendall Gabos
photograph

LAST THURSDAY WAS CONFLICTUAL

GRACIA LARSEN-SCHMIDT

Last Thursday was conflictual because my family and I went to the movie theater and it was muggy and mosquitoey outside, which definitely made it easier to force myself indoors on a summer night, but still! the sun hadn't even begun to think about setting when I held the door open for Micah and Mom and Dad but then ended up holding the door for fourteen other people because they just kept coming and I couldn't stop once I'd started because there was no way to fairly draw the line between who would be on the receiving end of my door-opening graces and who simply did not make the cut, and when I finally got into the movie theater, the floor was looking a little like it hadn't been vacuumed since the force awakened, but most people do not look at the floor when they walk in because they've got their eyes on the prize a.k.a. the concessions which is exactly where we were headed to get our four drinks and two large popcorns, the latter of which I had to share with my brother, Micah, and yes, I wanted the flavor "kettle corn" but Micah wanted "cheddar cheese" (gross), so since we couldn't come to an agreement on one or the other and the movie was literally about to start, we met halfway and put "kettle corn" on my side of the popcorn bucket and "cheddar cheese" on his.

We realized that the movie had not literally been about to start because splayed across the screen was a commercial for luxury orthotics offered in three colors: red, blue, and Metal Mixing Bowl gray, and this floating image of an insanely good deal on everyday orthotics was accompanied by soft, peppy music underscoring the voice of an unseen but probably elderly woman whose life had never been better because now she could walk to her granddaughter's soccer games three blocks away without a smidgen of arch pain, but then the screen abruptly changed to an ad for the very average dentist that we already subscribe to, and all the while I was trying to wait until the movie actually started to eat any popcorn but I couldn't help myself, and as I threw that first handful into my open mouth, I immediately had to come to terms with the fact that my side of popcorn and Micah's side of popcorn had jumbled together and it all tasted like "kettle cheddar corn cheese," which was annoying but perhaps less annoying than the person who decided to sit directly behind me because this meant that I couldn't lean my seat all the way back for maximum relaxation.

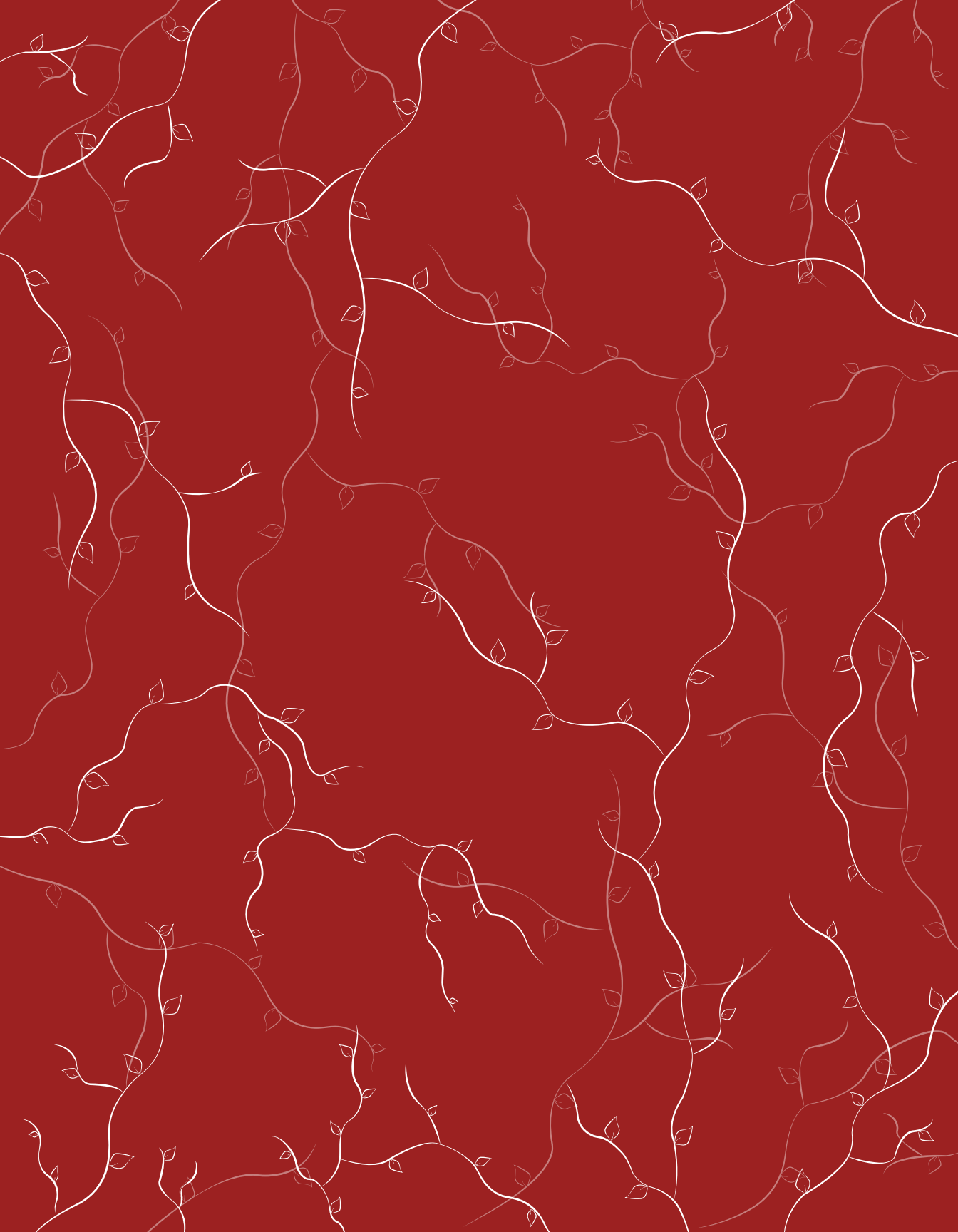
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POETRY

The movie started anticlimactically, and I couldn't stop thinking about how strange it was to watch a movie in the dark with complete strangers in a strange room and about how we were all isolated bodies communing together over overpriced buttery popcorn without ever conversing or exchanging eye contact and about how I could lose myself in this kind of space, in this plot, and become estranged from my reality for a moment or two or three or four or five or six or seven and all the numbers that I had ever known pounded at the gates where they were kept and I, their queen, floated above their brightly colored bodies and spoke in caramelized riddles which dissipated on the tongues of the clouds smiling up at me, and I [REDACTED] long enough to know the difference between [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Have you caressed the moon's dimpled cheek as she hums the impossible into existence? Neither have I, but I have donned a pair of stolen silken heels fitted with red luxury orthotics.





THE GLOW I NEED

ELENA LASKOWSKI

Traversing a familiar path, I pedaled my bike without much thought on the ride home from campus. The temperature was pleasant; even as the days shortened, October trailed itself lazily alongside the warm autumn light. When I looked up from the curved gravel road ahead, the curve of a crescent moon was looking back. I slowed to a stop to stare, and before I knew it, I was seeing the pearlescent sliver through the rectangle of my phone screen as I aimed the camera upwards.

This was not the first time I had stopped mid-pedal on the ride home. Wavering tree branches, large cloud shapes, and the most cliché of sunsets have all proved reason enough for me to slow my bike, press my toes to the ground, and take a closer look. But I think my most abrupt stops are driven by the desire to capture the moon in a sky still caught in the blues of daytime. More elusive than the dark-sky moon, it casts less of a contrast without the inky black from behind to emphasize its glow. This moon's appearance is rather light, gentle; settling into its uncommon but comfortable perch like a speckle on a robin's egg. Its rarity and beauty make it a prime target for the memorialization that follows a button-click. My hands and feet conducted the movement of a wheeled transport, but like many of us when confronted with natural beauty, I still felt the necessity to halt, look, and document.

The looking I feel is justified, the documenting I worry about. Digital archive: a replication, not the origin, of a lived experience. I have sometimes pedaled with phone in one hand, maneuvering a handle with the other as I ride further in hopes of finding the right angle to capture something in the sky. It makes me remember my six-year-old self attempting to ride my bicycle without using hands or feet. That particular endeavor ended in a trip to urgent care and a scar on my chin, so one would hope that I learned to take bike safety seriously. But still, I risk the fall for a desired snapshot.

Who do I even think I am? A contributor for *National Geographic*, crawling on her belly in the grass, waiting for the buffalo to lift its head? It's really not that serious. But there's a feeling of necessity, a yanking pull from my eyes to my hand to preserve the sanctity of the moment—to prove it existed. To myself or to an indifferent Instagram audience, I don't know. I would like to say it's partly for myself. I look back at my photo album; try to remind myself of moments I have forgotten.

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I want to slow down.

Some days, I feel my fingers itching constantly. I fear I have completely forgotten how to stand somewhere and just look around instead of reaching for the easy attention-fix in my pocket. I think we must all have been better at lingering in the world as children, without the temptation of a phone to pull us out of it. We must have gone hours without thinking about what a screen had to offer. But maybe I'm misremembering. Maybe there was always something, be it PBS Kids or Instagram, that had half a grip on my attention. In my young adult years, I have become increasingly attuned to how easy it is to go through life with rapid movements—one thing to the next, using technology to see more often than my surroundings. Despite my self-awareness, I feel there is no true disconnecting from the digital at this point in my life. I pronounced the daytime moon miraculous in comparison to the nighttime one, but the truth is that sometimes the sight of the nighttime moon still astounds me. The other night, I was driving along a road that often reveals something at the height of its incline—a painted smattering of clouds, or flock of migratory birds, or in this case: a clear and startling full moon. As I crested that hill, one hand holding the bottom of the wheel, and it arose in bright and crystal grandeur against the backdrop of the silver-speckled darkness, I felt something akin to a hard punch in the chest. I was shocked.

Even though this was really the same nighttime moon I have always seen, always gawked at, always loved, I was in disbelief at its presence. A voice in my head whispered: *it doesn't look real*. At first, I felt a familiar gratitude for the sense of wonderment, but it was quickly followed by fear. I almost didn't believe it was really there, didn't trust my own eyes. It made me question: how many moons do we see on a screen versus the one that's really in front of us? How many altered photographs or digital effects in films of the moon and the sun? How many vivid stars, astronomical events, meteors flashing?

Is it possible for my brain to lose sense of what's real and what's digitally constructed? This is a thought that keeps me up at night, terrified of blurring the lines of reality. The constant of the moon, a nightly companion, rendered just another object for my eyes to take in for a second and forget afterwards. A stranger.

In my photo album, I can choose to return to the picture I took on my bike that day in October. The still image is hued in husky blues; the visible clouds touched by a violet shade at their white cusps. The fallen light of dusk shadows the road, street lamps, and lone car, but the sky above still looms brightly. Alone, high above the low layer of wispy clouds, hangs the sliver of moon that slowed my pedaling to a stop. If I zoom in, I can see how the thumbnail starts to curve into the invisible shape of the rest of the circle. I remember the soft whisper of breeze that rocked the tree branches

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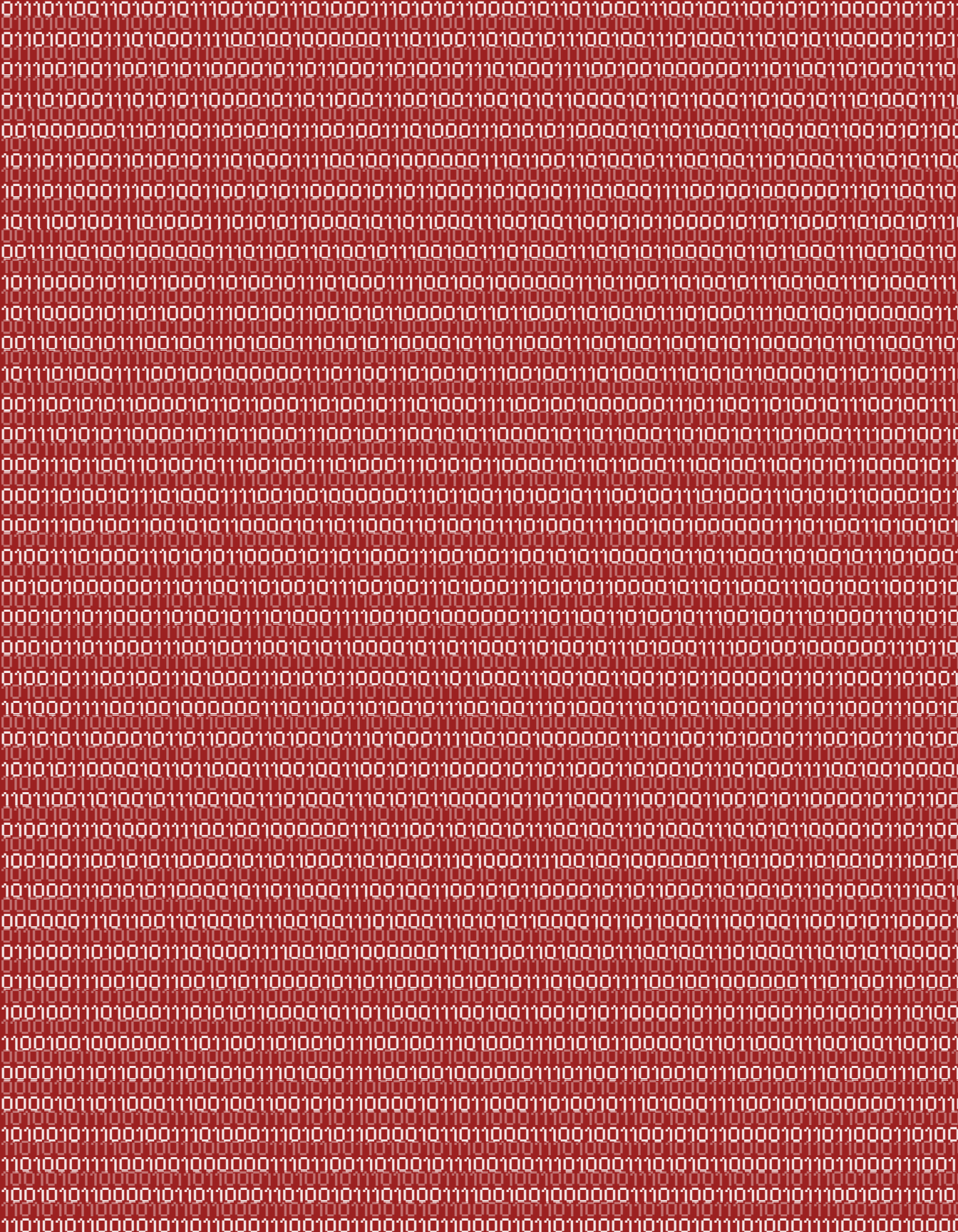
and bent the roadside weeds at the scene's frame. I remember the awe. The picture brings a few senses back to me; replications, but also reminders.

I find myself relieved to have this photo, even though I have many like it. And if I continue my habits, I will have more. It is not a bad thing, I think, to have the power to document natural wonders. But I can't help asking: is my mental image of the moon the one in my hand, or the one above the craning of my neck? I want my mind to be able to distinguish these, and I want my soul to recognize with what it holds kinship. My hope is for my perception of the world, and my existence in it, to be as real and tangible as the human experience permits. For my own peace of mind while witnessing this life everyday, I want—dare I say need—my body to know what ground it stands on, and where it is situated in the universe. How the earth holds, and the moon gazes.

Conscious of how much time I spend looking at the digital versus physical, I have started forcing myself to stare outwards. Like an exercise for the eyes; flicking them from leaf to grass blade instead of pixel to pixel. I try to ingrain the shape of clouds and maple saplings into my mind to reinforce what the physical world looks like. I don't think I'm in danger of truly forgetting, but I make the effort as a hopeful and meditative practice. In a daily pattern of inevitably inundating my vision with digital representations, it's all I can do to try and even it out with the physically present.

Whenever I see the moon, I slow my path. Sometimes, I take a photo. Other times, I still my body, level my breath, and just look.





SKINNER

OLIVIA HEBBLEWHITE

I want to believe
we speak because the body
hammers the gavel
and defends the soul.

That our voices are us,
the legacy we won't leave
to the chains of neat DNA.

What I mean is,
can I stay here, believing
imagination is imagination,
more than sprawled
chromosomes, more than Skin-
ner's neurons.
Till the day he died,
he refused to renounce
that we are anything but hides
whipped by rewards and punishments.

If language is solely
a watering hole,
interpersonal influence
sheer movement of molecules,

then why cry on
the brown loveseat,
the psychology textbook
so heavy in my lap?



The ways in which I love (the world)
are just an organized presentation
of the space and time
between each synapse.

And if now you can feel the salt
drying on my cheeks,
your helix must unwind like mine,
all this amassed feeling
sheer coincidence of stimulus.





OUT OF THIS WORLD
Nora Hitchcock
digital art

PULSE

CECILIA LAUSTEN

The water splashing at my feet is tinted red. It spirals down in patterns until it dilutes to a light pink and finally disappears down the drain. When it stays clear, I step out onto the cooled floor, leaving wet footprints in front of the low tub. The bathroom is warm. Humid air invades my senses, and steam lingers, clouding my reflection in the mirror.

My reflection clears enough to see my face and torso, but something about the angle seems off. I look taller, stretched thin as if the image isn't quite my own. A trick of old glass, I'm sure, but I don't move closer. My nose burns with the smell of citrus, the cheap, manufactured scented soap instead of old tobacco and must, a general air of decay that almost all the motels in Kass carry the second you cross the threshold. It's comforting, nonetheless, knowing that the yellow bar washes away any sins I've committed and prepares me for another restless night.

A few muffled sounds make their way through the thin bathroom walls, and the creaking floor tells me Will is pacing. I throw a towel on my hair and crack the door open. A rush of steam flows out and meets the cold bedroom air. The room is familiar, but I know I've never been here; all the safe houses hidden in the form of hotels are the same. Identical queen mattresses with worn sheets and cracked mirrors, ashtrays filled with buds sitting on the shitty end tables stained from various substances spilled over the years. The carpet under my bare feet is mainly worn through and almost catches as I step, so I pick my feet up a little more.

He's at the edge of the room, by the half-curtained window, whispering so I can't quite make out all the words. His tone changes with each step, rising and falling but growing harsher as the seconds tick by. I know he's trying his hardest to stay hushed; the walls are thin, and voices carry, and our situation and the atmosphere call for it—you shouldn't tell your secrets to whatever lurks beyond the dim hallways and the rooms on either side of us. Not that there seem to be any other guests around, but the members of the Void have always been excellent at keeping themselves hidden.

He finally faces me head-on but stares right through me like I'm not even there. He's a million miles away from this bedroom.

The lenses are hard to spot for an untrained eye because they seamlessly blend into the wearer's natural vision. They're micro-thin, almost invisible on the cornea's

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surface, but they always make Will's blue eyes a single shade darker, and even in the dim light, I still notice it. He's dug deep into the Nexus, and I know he's tracking the Void's movements, mapping them throughout the city.

I sink onto the bed, scrunching my hair before I throw the towel away. Even though he's tethered in, he must sense me in the real world because he blinks rapidly and returns to me.

"Sorry," he breathes out, "I thought I'd finish before you."

I brush him off with a shrug.

"Everything okay?"

Will purses his lips, a tell that he wants to lie to me, but he must think better because he shakes his head.

"Two more of ours were just found dead in East Kass."

That sucks the air from the room and proves the theory we've been working on for days: they know about the stolen plans, the information that exposes every little dirty secret and corruption in the city. The Void knows what we're capable of, and they need to wipe out any trace of resistance, so we're being hunted.

"Cal says we're safe here, but I'm not sure I believe anywhere in this goddamn city is safe." Will peeks out the window. "The Void has eyes everywhere."

I get up from the bed, gripping his arms and forcing him to look at me. "So do we."

His brows knit together, and his lips purse to a thin line. We both know we have allies out there, but it also goes unspoken that the numbers are dropping with the passing minutes.

"I need to get the files up." I nod toward the bathroom. "You should shower."

He leaves just as I tether myself in, blinking rapidly until the Nexus flares to life in my vision. It's a beautiful creation by the resistance—a pulsing network of light and code, the last safe haven carved out of the Void's digital grip where we can safely communicate, strategize, and gather intel without being traced. The Void—an empire hidden in the shadows, a government in all but name—tightens its hold on every system it touches, erasing dissent before it can take root. But this file, these stolen fragments of truth paid for in blood, could change that. Could unravel their fragile system from the inside and watch it crumble.

The file is still locked when I send it through. Its encryption is intact, but not for long. The receiver will break my code within minutes. And if we're lucky—if what we stole is worth the Void hunting us down—we'll strike before they have their chance.



“We should sleep.” I offer a small smile to Will when he enters the room, black pants hanging low on his hips. “Or at least try to.”

He nods, going toward the door. He jiggles the nob, relatches the lock, and attaches the flimsy chain to the other side. Satisfied, he joins me under the thin covers of the lumpy bed. The pillows we lie on are flat, and the general unease makes it hard to close my eyes. I sense Will’s anxiety better than my own. His face is taut, and his jaw is clenched so hard I think it could break. Even though he turned off the light, the glow from the city still illuminates half his face, and I can see his eyes are trained on the door.

I push myself closer in his hold, resting my head on his chest, hearing the strong yet fast beat of his heart. I know he won’t sleep. He won’t allow himself to, so I try to create a bubble for us where the outside world ceases to exist, and we’re safe somewhere far from here. I gently reach for his hand, pulling it toward my wrist, where his fingers hover for a moment. He knows what I’m doing, and a small smile etches on his face. His fingers press gently into my skin, just below the base of my thumb, and my heartbeat pulses under his touch, a reminder that I’m here, that I’m safe—and, above all, I’m alive.

His hold stays until my eyelids grow heavy, and his soft breath all but lulls me to sleep. I try to fight it, to stay awake so he doesn’t have to be anxious alone, but one of us should get some sleep, and it will never be him.

I haven’t been asleep long when the com rings once, then twice. We’re in danger. I practically throw myself out of Will’s hold as he scrambles for the device, holding it to his ear to answer the call. It’s loud and choppy on the other end, but the only thing that clearly makes its way through Cal’s panicked voice and the terrible connection is, “*Get somewhere safe.*”

It’s a simple command for us, but also a death sentence. Nowhere in this city is safe.

I was in the dream world a minute ago, but now I’m frantically pulling on clothes while Will holds a high-tech weapon toward the door. He’s standing firm, eerily calm, as I finish pulling my hair back.

“You’re going to the Chrono club, and you’re taking the bike.”

“No.” My voice is firm. “We’re going together, or I’m not going at all.”

He blows hard from his nose and shakes his head, but his eyes don’t leave the door. He starts toward it, knowing I’ll follow, and I do. He unlatches each lock, and with a quick look in both directions, he leads us out. The hallway on the fourth floor



stretches too long as if the motel is pulling itself apart in slow motion, but I'm sure it's my imagination playing tricks on me in the dim light. Four doors line each side of the corridor, a singular window at the end with a broken exit sign flickering an ominous red. We dance in the shadows until we reach the alley where the bike is parked.

The air is thick, and I can almost taste the smog that settles over the city in the dark. The lights are dimmer here. His hands grip my shoulders when we reach the bike. His stare, which is usually confident, is clouded in panic.

"I'm not going without you." I reaffirm.

"Yes, you are. You have to. Get to the bar. They'll know who you are and help you get out."

I grip onto his jacket as if I'm going to hold him forever, and I'm memorizing every inch of his face, knowing that if I leave him now, there's a chance I never see it again.

Tears well behind my eyes before I know what's happening, and I'm shaking my head with such fervor I think it might fall from my shoulders. A distant crash makes him lean over and start the bike. Danger is coming, or maybe it's already here. He'll send me away, and then he'll go to meet it head-on.

"Listen to me, Nyla," He cups my face in his hands, his thumb brushing away an escaped tear. "They'll come after me first, so you have to go. Okay?"

His voice cracks, and I'm trembling under his touch. I know he's right, that he's trying to get me to understand that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, but it doesn't mean that, at this moment, I care about anything other than staying with him.

He tilts his forehead to touch mine, and the world freezes. The noises die to a hum, and his breath is the only thing I hear. I reach down, grabbing his wrist, and gently place my fingers below his thumb, feeling his strong pulse around me. My breath catches in my throat, not trusting myself to speak, but I meet his lips for a kiss that neither of us hopes is our last.

His lips are warm and familiar, and his hands slide to my waist, pulling me closer. Our heartbeats synchronize, expanding in unison, and I pour everything I have into him: all my fears and regrets and a promise that if I don't see him again in this life, we'll meet again in the next.

He parts from me first and smiles a small, broken smile.

"Go." He whispers.

Tears flow as I pull a helmet over my head and swing my leg over the bike, kicking it forward and racing out of the alleyway. When I glance at the side mirror, he's already gone.



The wind whips around me as I speed down the seemingly endless stretch of highway toward Chrono. It's wide, almost empty, and the few cars that line the road ahead are clear of my path. The high-tech bike pulses with an electric blue glow, illuminating the road beneath me as I race forward. I focus on the skyline looming ahead, but check the mirrors every few seconds to make sure I'm still alone. There is no sign of the Void, but that doesn't mean they don't know exactly where I'm going. The bike accelerates smoothly as I weave through the lanes.

I ping Will again and again, but each call goes unanswered.

I almost turn around, but three sets of lights flash behind me. They're far enough behind but drawing tighter with each second, and the red hue they emit from their bikes tells me everything I need to know. I press down the accelerator as far as it will go and lurch forward.

My body is moving on autopilot when I make it to the club, hiding the bike in another alley and hastily wiping the tears from my face. I follow the flashing lights of the club into another dimension—one seemingly untouched by the weight of the world pressing down on me. The bass reverberates through my chest, and the air is thick with the scent of sweat, liquor, and something sweet that makes my stomach turn. It's bustling with people. Most are dancing drunkenly in the middle, some are at the bar, and others are in the VIP section overlooking it all.

I keep my head down even though I have friends in Chrono. I know the Void has them, too.

Weaving through the sea of bodies, I move toward the bar, dodging drunken dancers who sway without care, their laughter spilling over the pounding music. The club is almost pitch black, but its darkness is cut through by violet, red, and electric blue beams, flashing in rhythmic bursts from fixtures embedded high in the walls and ceiling.

The bass-heavy music thrums through the floor, a deep, pulsing beat that rattles in my chest and seeps into my bones. It's something electronic, fast, and almost hypnotic. I finally slip through the cascade of people and find a barstool that feels too slick, too stiff, but I sink into it anyway. Facing me, mirrors stretch across the back wall, reflecting the club's entrance in a distorted, shifting blur of neon and movement.

For a moment, my gaze shoots forward. It lingers on the shelves behind the bartender, stacked with sleek, glowing bottles of liquid in every shade of electric color—blue, red, green, violet—each swirling faintly as if they're reacting to the music's relentless bass.

I shake away the haze, the distraction fleeting. Settling back into my seat, eyes



locked on the exit, I wait. I want to believe I lost them, but deep down, I know that's not true. I com Will again and again. Each time, it rings and dies.

The bartender makes her way over to me, and as soon as she registers my familiar face, a solemn look crosses her features.

"Are you alone?"

I nod, tears threatening to spark again. Her mouth opens, then closes as three figures enter the club. They think they're slick, keeping toward the edges of the room. Even though they act like faceless goons, they're highly trained, and their only mission is to track me down before I cause their bosses any more trouble.

The one closest to me clocks where I sit at the bar and motions to the others. I'm alone and the most tired and heartbroken I have ever been in my life. I want to yield, accept my fate, and hope that someone out there finishes what Will and I helped start.

They close in, and a hard hand comes down on my shoulder, fingers digging into muscle, but I don't fight it.

Maybe I should reach for my weapon, all beautiful edges and sleek lines, throw a punch or make a break for it, but somehow, I can't bring myself to move. I exhale, slow and shaky, feeling the weight of everything settle in my bones. This city was never going to let me go.

The bartender moves first. A flash of motion. The sharp *clink* of metal against glass. I pull my gun before it's too late. Three shots ring out—the music cuts. Bodies scatter, some screaming, others ducking for cover. The grip on my shoulder falters, and I barely process whether the blood that sprays is mine or theirs.

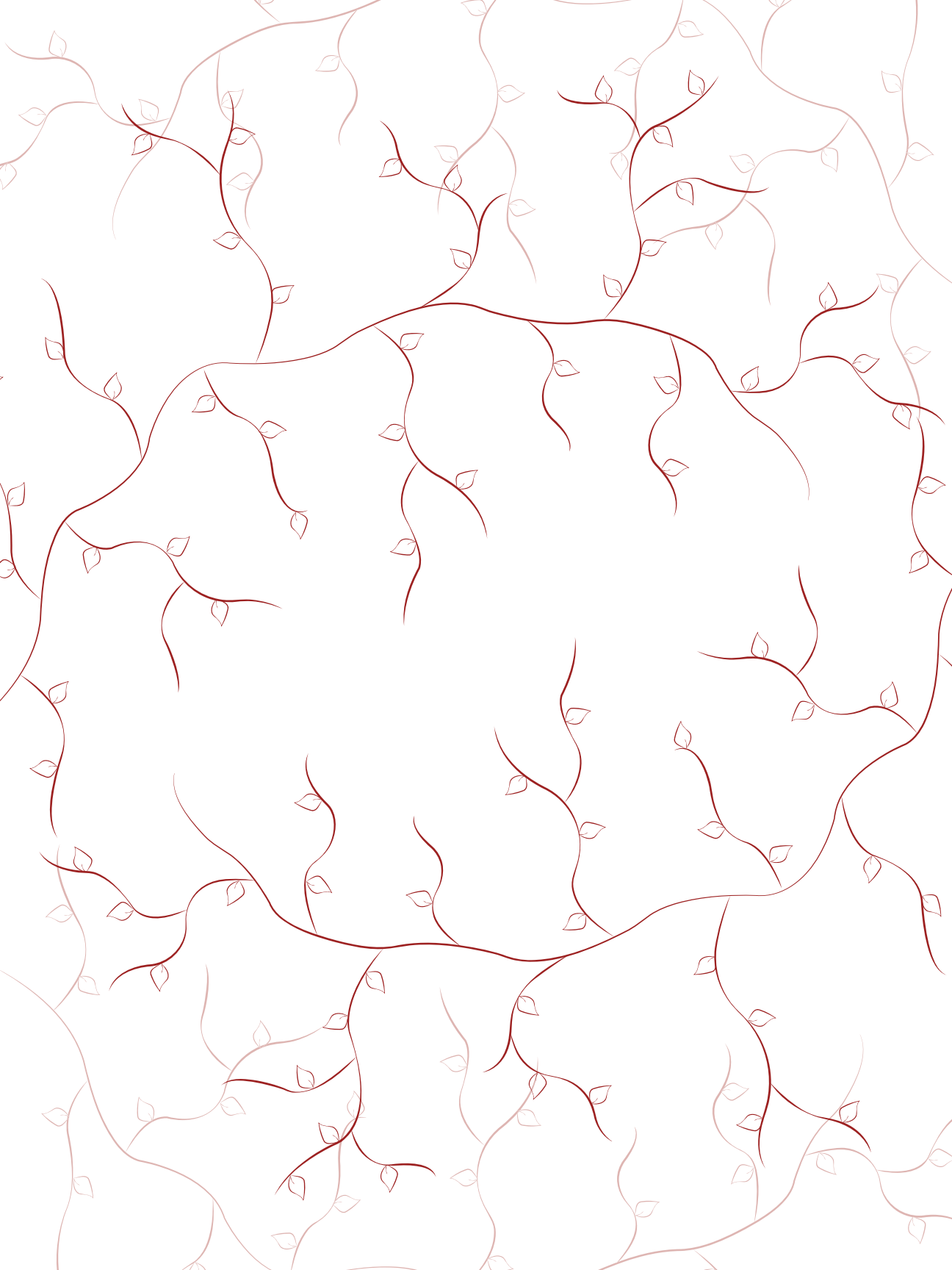
Someone shouts my name. Another shot. Closer this time.

Something slams into me hard, the world tilts, the taste of metal sharp on my tongue.

The impact steals my breath, but I can't tell if I'm falling or still fighting. My steady pulse beats against my ribcage, and then, another sound—boots pounding, voices calling over the chaos, arms catch me before I hit the ground.

Will?







REDEFINING THE MIRROR

Sheena Vang

acrylic on canvas

SLIP INTO THE PLASMA POOL

NICODEMUS ZINOS

I feel a numbness this time. Maybe I felt one last time too, but now that deep cold seems to be all I can feel. I was stalking her Spotify the other day. I wanted to see what music she had last listened to. I saw a playlist called “potential walk out songs” and I had to wonder. It had two songs in it. One was “Fancy” by Drake and the other was “Old Time Rock and Roll” by Bob Seger. Not the songs I would listen to before shooting myself in the head, but she always did have terrible taste in music. Maybe I’m overthinking. The playlist could be about anything really.

My friend left traces everywhere. On Snapchat I see video after video of different people that knew her, posting old memories. Instagram is full of pictures remembering her. The other night, me and a bunch of friends watched *A Phantom of the Opera* (2014). It had been our friend’s favorite guilty pleasure movie and afterwards, I looked to see if she had logged it on Letterboxd and was disappointed that the only movie she ever logged was *Airplane*.

The digital footprint of a dead loved one has always made me laugh. My little brother, who died three years ago, was in a family Discord server, and his account lay dormant for years. One day, my dad found out how to access it and almost gave my sister a heart attack when she got an alert that her dead brother was typing in the group chat. I still look at his Steam account as it counts up the days since he was last online. I hope they never delete his account for being inactive; it’s a cozy feeling, seeing the games that he last played, looking at his reviews and screenshots. It’s nice to not have to hold on to all the memories myself. Faces change, and voices disappear. Even now, I can’t remember the color of my friend’s eyes, or the way my brother sounded. 100 years ago and the ghosts of the dead stole those things away for good. But now I can conjure them up again, I can go on the photo album my family has shared online and look and see. I can stare into a screen and see my dead friend, reanimated for 12 seconds, laughing with me at her wedding. But as I rewatch these videos and look over a Spotify playlist, I cannot forget how incomplete it all is. 12 seconds begins to feel like an eternity as you watch it over and over again. 12 seconds begins to feel like all you leave behind.

Without these recordings, however, I would have only my memory to rely on and memory is a fickle thing. Many times in history, witnesses have pointed fingers

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at defendants, indicting them for terrible crimes, only for a DNA test to later prove innocence. Almost immediately after viewing something, we begin to forget certain aspects of it as our mind transfers short-term memory into long-term. Before writing, folk tales were passed down orally and would change drastically from the original telling. Centuries of playing telephone created all sorts of supernatural legends and myths. Then writing was invented and created more stability for the human collective. We could read the thoughts of our predecessors and instill our own ideas into a (semi)permanent form. And yet there was still some disconnect there. The words must be visualized by the reader, they are subject to the audience's view. But now there's something else entirely. We can record audio-visuals. We can create 3D models of the universe. We have created artificial intelligence. We can record our friends and tuck it away for a rainy day to feel their warmth again. And yet the deeper we go into the plasma pool, the more we depend on it.

I recently heard the phrase "plasma pool" in a Cronenberg movie, *The Fly*. In the film, Seth Brundle, an eccentric scientist, creates a teleportation device and dares to test it on himself. It goes terribly wrong, and slowly his humanity falls away from him. The plasma pool is the whirling vortex of information he entered. It's like the internet in some ways, but really it's all digital information, all stored data, to be manipulated at a whim. Seth stepped into the pool, he took his soul and translated it into so many 1's and 0's. He traveled the stream and risked a confluence, and when he left that stream, a 1 appeared where a 0 had been before.

That movie came out in the 80s and yet its relevance only increases as time goes on. We are all linked to the plasma pool now. We all have openings to it sitting in our pockets. And when we stare into this pool, it is not us that look back, but a reconstruction. There is a Nico within the plasma pool, there lies a piece of my brother, a fragment of my friend. It is a living, consuming thing, an amorphous thing, terrifying and yet beautiful. Maybe the great cold I feel is me slipping into the pool. I feel it's wonderfully uncaring code wash over me; there is no moralization here, no hidden meaning, no chasing an imaginary dragon; there is the sole purpose of identification. To be known, to let the algorithm create a facsimile. It doesn't attempt to change me, it only looks to record that change.

In the end, you must offer your soul to the pool. After your grave crumbles to dust, and the bridge we wrote our names under falls into disrepair; after the last person ever speaks your name aloud; only after all these things will the plasma pool release your binary. Only after green grows over everything will it revert the 1 back to 0, and that is enough for me.



IF I GO

EVAN SCHWARZ

If I go to Dublin and ask you: why
 Were you crying that night? Will you tell me
 Of the dead, the drifting of dying screens. Though
 Maybe my mom will text you: I am a fish.
 I'll say, there is water at the bottom
 Of the ocean. With all that is dying.
 You might call me and say you dug holes again.
 I'll say I can fill them with old pictures
 We made on blue printer paper and that
 I might stay lost in Berlin for a while.
 Well, message me if you change your mind, please.
 Look. Ask. Where is that beautiful house with
 That beautiful wife? It all came floating,
 Messages of airborne toxic events
 Drift in as I dream of us in *Le Lit*.
 And feeling Klimt's *Kiss*, I'm trying to rise
 Through the ceiling, but held down by your hands.
 So go. Let me go.
 You psychopomp.
 I'll be here.



AUGMENTED STATE

ELENA LASKOWSKI

Through the links of the fence
on the side of the bridge
is the red moon

over the railway tracks—
big enough to take up
a whole 4x4 wire slot.

A face takes shape
in my mind's hazy eye;
on the rusty surface, smudges of

craters or dust or grey matter
form features that could be
tormented or jolly.

One face splits into two;
masculine/feminine crescent
slot together, their noses

well-met like puzzle pieces—
hers Roman, his sloped.
Amorphous shapes emerge

and distortions leak from the
loosening of the gaze.
The night is a drug, too.





PREACHERS
Noah Uphus
photograph

SUN DOUBLE, CUL DE SAC

GAVIA BOYDEN

my eyes burn a circle
and, further back,
the past settles like dust,

milk ring visions and a plastic spoon,
a backyard where chairs sling
low-backed and humming,
a sandbox cooling damp,

swing-set chains brittled up blue,
tricycle shifting its weight,
neighbor's son bare-chested for groceries,
a retriever hurling against the gate,

kitchen window leaking radio waves
into the grass-smell of day,
kissing green into a thigh,
saying, keep this—



HOW TO MAKE SLEEP

JOSIE TREGEMBO

Look for purple
out in the lilac forest, the sultry garden, or the shimmering river bank.
Conjure a void of lavender with the essence of the flora you found.
Breathe in, let it consume you as you consume it.

Seek Earth at its primest
where the largest tree stands firm, textured in a soap of maple.
Reflect its skin onto yours, a soothing coat to layer your mind,
body, and soul.

Then, call for her sister
just below the sunrise, she stands boldly in the wilderness of chirping critters.
Absorb the cedar through your nose, and capture its taste in your heart.
Let it shrill your veins into ease.

Mourn for rain
during the darkest hour, dance and cry simultaneously.
Wait to be cleansed from the terrors that choked your desires
when the sun denied you glory.

Finally, lie in warm colors,
air is your cover, grass is your bed, and leaves are your pillow.
When silence knocks on the door, let it come in,
for it's a rare ethos to find.





A GIRL IS A CIRCUS
Bella Maldonado
paper collage

GRANDMA ANNA-MAY

AVERY COMES

When they finally pull up to the house and see the property stretching for miles, the car will be covered in dust and dirt from the long ride in. It is the only house visible on the horizon, but they know there's more hiding in the treeline. The gravel driveway leading in is lined with a simple cornfield on the left and a large barn on the right. The cornfield is Grandpa Bob's personal field, not like the acres of soybeans he farms for profit. All the kids will be taking a bag of fresh sweetcorn home at the end of the weekend. The barn to the right has a huge combine tractor in it. I remember Bob taking that out on the fields when we were just starting our family, but he's far too old for it now. Now he just waits quietly for these reunions. The minivan eventually creaks to a stop at the pavement right in front of the garage. If the sun were still in the sky, the whole family could see the towering windmills spanning the countryside. But alas, darkness has covered the practically empty scenery, and with it comes a blanket of stars. Stars so bright and endless that, in the absence of light, the dusty Milky Way can't help but show off her beauty.

Car doors slide open, and each person takes their time exiting, stretching out sore limbs. The ride felt faster when they were kids, but now it stretches long and painful. They grab their duffel bags and pillows, making their way inside the garage with their eyes nearly shut from exhaustion. One of them, my youngest grandchild, takes a moment to look up at that vast, brightly freckled sky. For a breath, we appreciate the view together, but when I return my phantom gaze to her, she is crying. I drift towards her, but she's already wiping her eyes and following her siblings inside.

The house is one level with a basement, but long enough to comfortably fit a family. Light amber wood cabinets hold my coffee mugs, and the dining table is packed with cousins. When we first married, Bob and I started out in a trailer home on this very same property. We lived there for years, raising our babies. We finally saved enough to build this farmhouse, with enough room to stretch out, not even 20 feet from where we were. The trailer was torn down, and the ground beneath turned into my garden. That garden reminded us of what we used to have and how we've grown and changed. I used to walk through the garden and think to myself, "This was where the sink was...and this corner was our bedroom...my nightstand, my books, were right here." It's surreal.

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My home is a lonesome one now, but it used to be filled with love—our eight children roughhousing, Bob tending to the fields, and me keeping everything in order. To see everyone back together is so special. It brings me warmth—warmth that eases the persistent chill that's been plaguing me. I spent hours on this home-cooked meal, and I believe it's time for supper, but are those pizza boxes on the table? Oh, that's okay, I probably didn't cook enough anyway. I try to get everyone's attention to say grace, but they pay me no mind. That's alright, I suppose they have lots of catching up to do. I catch a glimpse of movement and see my tearful grandchild near the wall. Oh dear.

My movement towards her feels sluggish, but I have to console her. That's my job, and I will not allow crying in this home without a hug. I wrap my arms around her and—

I slip right past her. She shivers and cries some more.

WONDER LULLABY

CASS BRYANT

Draw a frog from memory
And ponder if the front legs count as arms
Or if amphibians really have toes
Consider neither in your sketch

Spell the sound of wind through trees as you imitate it
Spread your arms like it's wrapping itself around you
Fill your lungs with requisite wonder and
Lips puckered, teeth together, *shhhhh*

If this doesn't work, make the wind water
Don't you know they really sound the same?
Listen. It was the right sound all along
Feel it wash down your shoulders and trickle through your fingers

Believe in wishes when you blow out candles
Feel the weight of not superstition but optimism
Settle on your shoulders like a warm father's hand
Until, finally, you trust that it could turn out okay



it's a belief
that if you
have had a
friend for 7 years,
you are friends
forever

i thought
that
applied
to us.

but,

cowardice
tends
to
prevent
that.



PET-SITTING

MACK BRUSCA

The world is devoid of sound as I make my way through the research building. Doors slide open silently. Lights flicker on as I trigger their sensors without their usual click, and even the floor swallows all sound my footsteps would make. Normally there would be at least some quiet chatter in this building, but it's completely lifeless now. Holiday weekend. People who could afford to not go to work did so, and those who couldn't convince their dear friends to cover their shifts and forfeit their own desperately-needed break. I am one of those sorry bastards. Watching Moltz's little creature repays a debt to him that I have long left unpaid, but knowing that I'm "doing the right thing" doesn't make me any less pissed off about having to go to work on a holiday. While I wallow in self-pity, I shuffle into the sanitizing chamber leading to the lab and get the shit scared out of me by the hiss of the air nozzles. My already sour mood was now even worse. The door to the lab finally opens, and I emerge in a cloud of sanitizer-fog to see the silhouette of my fellow pet-sitter for the week: Sara Ridley, xenozoologist. An extremely nice woman. I'm sad to see her here—she works harder and more earnestly than most people I know in our xenozoo department. If anyone deserves a long break, it's her. I give her a wave and small smile, and she smiles back nervously. As I turn to put my stuff down in the breakroom, she waves her hand in my face to get my attention again and hands me a clipboard.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SB-126's CARE:

- Keep light very low. It is ok if it is too dark to see the subject.
- Keep at 2°F. Temperature is controlled by the red knob.
- Do not talk in the lab. Wear nothing in the lab that can obscure your mouth. Make sure you are familiar with the voices of your lab partners.
 - SB-126 is able to perfectly mimic what it hears and has a history of manipulating people by doing so. **DO NOT ACKNOWLEDGE IT WHETHER IT SPEAKS IN SOMEONE ELSE'S VOICE OR ITS OWN. DO NOT ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS IT ASKS. DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING IT TELLS YOU.**

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- SB-126 is capable of producing sounds of extremely high and deadly decibel levels. If you suddenly have trouble breathing or feel pressure in your chest, evacuate immediately and contact BIO.
 - **UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD YOU RETURN TO THE LAB UNTIL BIO DEEMS IT SAFE. PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO EXTREMELY HIGH DECIBELS CAN RESULT IN PULMONARY CONTUSIONS, BURST LUNGS AND EXPLODING HEADS.**

Despite what I'm sure you've heard about SB-126, it's entirely harmless and very low maintenance. You'll probably get bored watching it— I know I do sometimes. Thanks again, and see you in January!

- MOLTZ

I let out a huge sigh of relief. I'm basically getting paid to do nothing all week— exactly what I wanted on a holiday shift. I give Sara a thank you gesture, and she signs you're welcome to me.

You know ASL? I sign, surprised

Sara's tired eyes light up. *Yes!* She signs, *I'm a C-O-D-A. My parents are Deaf. ASL is my first language.*

I nod at Sara, impressed. *Wow, that's cool! I learned ASL at university.*

Sara gives a relieved sigh. *I _____! Today _____ all week very easy! _____?*

She signs blazingly fast, and with signs I don't recognize. My cheeks grow hot.

Sorry, I've forgotten a lot of ASL! I sign with a wince, *I didn't understand. Can you sign again, slower?*

She giggles to herself, filling the cold and quiet room with comforting noise. Sara signs to me again, slowly and deliberately. *Sorry! I am excited to sign. This week will be very easy! We don't need to speak. How do you feel _____? _____?*

I pause for a moment, trying to decipher the last few signs she used. I think one of them was "math"? Or maybe it was "science", given the context? I remember doing very poorly during the school subjects unit in my ASL classes. Seeing me struggle, Sara smiles and signs again, even slower.

L-A-B, you like? How do you feel?

I nod in understanding. *O-K. Bored. Tired.* I sign, laughing with embarrassment. *L-A-B, I hate. I want to go home. How do you feel?*

She deflates at this question, her shoulders drooping and eyes darkening. *Same. Tired, bored, _____. _____ animal _____. M-O-L-T-Z _____.*



I nod again, this time completely clueless. Sara's eyes narrow ever so slightly—she definitely knows I didn't understand any of that. Gesturing to the backpack hanging on my shoulder, I wave goodbye and make my way towards the break room to escape this increasingly awkward conversation. Sara waves back and walks away stiffly.

As I place my bag down on an angular and scratchy armchair, I hear a deep sigh come from the other room. Clearly she's anxious. A distraction would do her some good—I grab my notepad from my backpack and sort through my most colorful markers. I see her doodle in her own notepad all the time. Maybe I could get her to draw with me?

"It looks so sad and lonely in there," a soft feminine voice calls from the next room.

My heart stops.

"It's all by itself... In a small, dark box. It's inhumane."

What the hell is she doing?! I sprint from the break room into the enclosure room, throwing my hands up in bewilderment. When I burst into the room, my mortified face is matched by Sara's, who points in accusation at the enclosure window. No larger than an oven door, the window sits at eye level and reveals nothing but darkness. All vitals look normal. All doors are locked. The darkness is entirely still, and the room is silent save for me and Sara's gasps and shaky breaths.

"It's all by itself..." the voice repeats in the exact same cadence, exact same tone. It's unmistakably Sara's voice, but it's coming from the enclosure. Sara slowly creeps towards the doorway, her hands shaking. I meet her in the middle and stand close by. Neither of our eyes leave the small black window.

"T-This thing is brilliant!" A man's voice stammers from within the enclosure. "Did you get all of that? We had a full conversation!"

"Mimicking. It is *mimicking*," A stern voice booms. A large metallic thud comes from the enclosure, and me and Sara jump back in shock. For just a moment, a flash of movement appears in the window.

"Today, I will catch it in its lies, and prove you *wrong*." The voice is Moltz's.

A second of silence follows. I glance over at Sara's face, and see her fear melt into an emotion I can't quite place. Suddenly, I hear the low rumble of many voices, a crowd murmuring behind the glass window.

"It is merely a mimic. It has been feigning intelligence this entire time," Moltz scolds. "There is no time to celebrate my discovery, however. You all must understand the terrible implications of this knowledge, and what you have done."

"For one year and seven months, you all taught SB-126 to speak and understand human language. You all spoke in front of it *constantly*. Up until this very moment



every one of you believed it was intelligent, and it took advantage of your trust and your ignorance to become even more convincing. This thing was able to manipulate the supposed brightest minds in the country—imagine what it could do if it *escaped*? Anyone not in this lab right now would fully believe it was sentient. If it were to ever escape, it could teach others of its species to mimic us and weaponize our language against us!”

The voices become hushed, and SB-126 lashes out again at the window.

“You talk like it’s doing this to take over the world or something!” Sara’s voice retorts. “It’s an *animal*. It’s not capable of plotting to kill us all. It isn’t doing this out of malice!”

“Malicious or not, SB-126 is too dangerous to be freed. Hell, too dangerous to be left *alive*, but conservation laws mean euthanizing this thing—”

SB-126 suddenly falls silent. Me and Sara are completely motionless, glued to the spot in terror. Gradually, the sounds of hissing and coughing from within the enclosure grow louder and louder.

“Agh—fuck! What is that?!” A woman shouts. She gasps between violent coughs. A man’s voice joins in, struggling to get any words out. “Gas leak? I c-can’t smell anything—” Soon, the whole room is smothered with the sound of groans, vomiting, and choked screams. SB-126 slams a hand into the window and holds it there. It digs its soft, slimy, webbed digits into the glass, searching for any hold.

“—Out!” Moltz gurgles, “EVERYONE— GET OUT!”

All hell breaks loose. The scientists screech and stampede away like wild animals, creating a violent cacophony. An alarm blares, and all noise becomes unintelligible—my heart stings with fear almost instinctively before I realize it’s coming from SB-126. I grab hold of Sara’s arm and give it a squeeze, trying to ground myself in reality. She doesn’t react.

As the uproar begins to die down, a single man’s voice can be made out. “Guys... Moltz...!” the man gasps. A loud thud. He lets out a scream with all of the strength he has left. Rubber soles stomp and slide against tile. Wet coughs, spitting, gurgling, drowning. Something bursts. I feel lightheaded. Bile starts to build in my throat.

The drone of the alarm ends, replaced by my ringing ears. I try to push the images of a man crumpling and splitting open out of my mind. I try to stop myself from picturing blood pooling on the floor only a foot from where I’m standing. I try to convince myself that the tightness in my chest is just from panic, not from a scream my ears can’t pick up. The sound of footfalls comes from the enclosure—two pairs, walking in an even rhythm. Each step sends a hollow echo through the lab.

“Sara.” Moltz’s voice rings out, halting the noise. “If I could, I would kill this



thing with my *bare hands*. Does that answer your question?”

SB-126’s hand disappears in the darkness. “Doctor Moltz, *it can hear you*. If you’re going to say awful things about it, the least you could do is do it in another room!” Sara’s voice says.

Moltz’s voice grows louder, closer. “I don’t give a damn, Sara! I’ll say whatever the hell I want in front of it.”

“You’re going to rile it up again! Do you want MORE people to die?!”

Moltz laughs his deep rumbling laugh—the same laugh I hear at the water cooler or on video calls, now laced with venom. “As if you fucking care if people live or die. You want to release this thing back into the wild, on its developing third-world planet,” he spits, “This thing is a living sonic weapon with a hatred for humanity. Releasing it can only go one way.”

“And whose fault is that, huh?! It’s OURS!” Sara screams, “It’s our responsibility to make this situation better, or at least try, god dammit! We can start by giving it a better enclosure that resembles its natural habitat, and raising the temperature so that it’s not in a constant state of torpor and go from there. A simple, actionable plan, Moltz!”

My eyes wander to SB-126’s vitals again at the mention of temperature. 30°F—more than ten times warmer than it should be. I step towards the enclosure to lower the temperature, but Sara grabs my shoulder and holds me firmly in place. When I turn my head to face her, she looks at me with pleading eyes. Beneath the desperation in her gaze is powerful resolve.

“So it gets a nice enclosure and becomes more active. Then what?” Moltz asks, “We say sorry and ask nicely to not kill us all? We learn to deal with having to evacuate the lab every day because it won’t stop screaming? It’s not happening. This thing is a lost cause.”

“We captured a highly intelligent creature, took it far away from its home and into horrible living conditions, and pushed it to become violent,” Sara snarls, “And now that it’s retaliated against us, we plan to just keep it imprisoned here in a comatose state until it withers away and dies! What we’ve done to this poor animal—and what we *continue* to do—is sickening. How can you live with yourself?! How can you just sit back and do nothing?!”

Sara lets her arm drop from my shoulder. Her gaze falls to the floor.

Moltz pauses, taking a sharp breath in. “I lost all sympathy for that thing the day it killed Jonas. That you can still bring yourself to *defend* this monster after it murdered one of our own is disturbing, Sara. Get out of my sight before I report you to HR for disrespecting the dead.”



“So it’s doomed to die here? It can never be free?” Sara’s voice says in a harrowing tone.

SB-126’s tirade ends, and silence blankets the room once more. It lets that final statement hang in the air before repeating, “It can never be free?”. It repeats it again and again, pausing between each sentence. Waiting for a response.

Sara chokes down a sob and strides out of the room with her face turned away from me. My first instinct is to run after her, but I find myself unable to draw my gaze away from the tiny, black window. I feel a prick in my eyes and the formation of tears.

“I’m sorry, buddy,” SB-126 cries to itself in Sara’s voice. “I don’t think there’s anything I can do. We all failed you. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”



ONE SENTENCE

AVA JAX

Upon the arrival of the Sunday Pepin Weekly,
which was, as always,
enjoyed with twice-heated dark roast,
headlines confirmed the
inevitable abandoning of their home.
Darlene, then, first thought of her brothers, Anya's silk
hummingbird, half-bottled Bombay,
Cheryl's perfume, the dog.



HYDRANGEA LANE

RACHEL SMALL

Store Front

Hydrangea Lane

Perennials

Beds 1, 2, 3

Annuals

Beds 4, 5

Bed 6

The owners didn't know
 It was wildfires when the smoke crept in
 But the next morning they were researched:
*The city—worst air in the world—worse
 Than a pack a day.* It was exciting, like a drama,
 So I worked and we breathed sublimated bark
 Thick like wax, watered the hydrangeas,
 Coughed, and set off with headaches
 Sagging like fragile stems
 Under heavy blossoms
 Quick to yellow.

I was only good to the laurels.
 Something happened in Hydrangea Lane
 And I bittered from the gaudy flowers,
 Their unquenchable roots,
 And my own cloddishness,
 Stomping and squashing,
 Over-underwatering,
 Swamping the aisles between pots
 Leaving soil sucked dry.



The laurels were gentle, sturdy,
Tired from storms all summer,
Leaning on the fence, a neighbor,
Or suspended somehow in the soupy air.
I was kind and they were generous,
Grateful root balls drenched
Half underground and bound in burlap.





CRIMSON HORIZON
Sammi Bergren
acrylic on canvas

RETURNING TO THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

GAVIA BOYDEN

where my childhood bears relocated
in donut honey traps
and left pawfuls of butterflies
in the gravel drive

the main road smelled like thick oil
and dark berries, a musky wildcat
lunging into the thistles tawny,
by strawberry lane

a rainbow trout head against
river rock made me turn away
to dipper witness,
path middled by velcro weeds

my mom and i pressed our sleds to our chests
as the snow plow sucked by,

and now i twist up with the memories
and where did the color go
all the bears are casinos
all the rivers, tame.



BRIDGES OF ANIMACY

LILA COVAL

In my hometown, behind the church school where we used to walk the dogs and down the hill that taught us to sled, sits a creek. I know her by the name she's been given, but not by the name she prefers. My father used to drag me down to the creek and hold my hand as I stepped across the rocks slippery with algae and mud; in the winter, he'd keep a steady hand on the back of my jacket when we balanced on the creek's body turned to ice and snow.

Last night, I went to the creek alone. My father didn't hear me leave, and for the fraction of a second it took to slip out the front door, I considered turning back. I carried the shame of my momentary hesitation down the driveway, across the street, all the way to the church school, and down the hill. The wind whispered to me through the voice of the trees and I knew better than to hum along. Their song was not one I knew, and the birds supported the harmonies without the need for human intervention.

There was no one at the creek when I arrived, and I dipped my fingers into the water to feel her heartbeat. I opened my mouth to greet her, but no sound came out—I was there to listen. In the dirt beside the creek, I closed my eyes and laid back, caring not for the grass in my hair and the dragonflies circling my body. For a long moment, I heard nothing but my breathing.

My breathing was the breeze through the leaves, the squirrels rustling through the underbrush, the chirp of crickets somewhere invisible to me, and the creek.

The water kissed my fingertips and laughed when I flinched. She asked why I was afraid of her, she told me that only the guilty fear the world from which they were created. My confusion was met with a hum, a low sound that coated the rocks by my feet. Goosebumps erupted up my arms.

Perhaps you should fear me, she whispered, quiet and seductive, and she traced the curves of my knuckles, first the pinky, then my ring finger. When she reached my thumb, our breathing grew louder. *You have been told what I am, not who I am.*

I recalled my favorite book from my childhood, one of dragons and magic and war, and the words embroidered into the adolescent fabric of my mind: "The sea is emotion incarnate. It loves, hates, and weeps. It defies all attempts to capture it with words and rejects all shackles. No matter what you say about it, there is always that which you can't." And such were the words of my fear, my guilt, the separation.



You see?

The goosebumps on my skin did not smooth, and the creek grew louder still.

Am I just water, child?

Grass and pebbles scraped my neck when I shook my head. Because ‘water’ was just a word, just a lifeless, static excuse for an unnecessary division. My heart pounded in my chest, battling against my ribcage and fighting to return to the Earth—was I worthy of the blood in my veins, the creek roaring beneath my skin?

My lips cracked open at last, and the thick perfume of the moss just inches from my ear caressed my tongue, greeting a friend it had not ever known. “But I take my shoes off to step in mud and I take my gloves off to hold snow, I take my sweatshirt off to embrace the wind and I take off my coat to give the rain a softer landing,” I whispered, a desperate plea punctuated by the shame warming my cheeks, “what more can I give?”

A bee buzzed above me, meeting the pitch of the creek’s soft purr.

“I step around the fallen flower petals in the street, I do! I collect rocks and then put them back, with their friends and family, I stop my car and remove animals from the road—”

The creek gurgled and bubbled, spitting at my chest. My shirt soaked through to my skin, tightening and leaching the air from my lungs. The river trapped within my flesh churned and crashed.

Silence, the creek hissed, and the birds stilled in the trees, the wind rested in the branches, and the squirrels stood up straight. I closed my mouth, but the taste of moss and my insignificance stuck to my teeth.

Silence endured, broken only by the breathing of the creek and the grass underneath my head. My heartbeat followed the pulse of the dirt, the dragonflies, and the tree roots. We breathed together, in-out, in-out, in-out, until my shirt was dry and the tension from my shoulders had melted into the late summer air. We breathed together, our pulse proof of our connection, the truth with which the separation I’d come looking to remedy could be undone.

The creek laced around my fingers and pulled me to her unruly body. *Remember the way we were always meant to be? We mustn’t forget the depth beneath our shared skin, child, for without it, we are nothing.*

Around us, the wind resumed her trill, the birds picked up the harmonies, and the trees helped me to my feet. I wiped the creek from my eyes, and never had I seen so much life.



A FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

LAUREN WANDER

Faustian Bargain (n.): A mythical bargain inspired by the iconic tragic play: *Faust*.

In this infamous play by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust trades his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge. To “strike a Faustian bargain” is essentially a metaphor for being willing to sacrifice anything (one’s soul, free will, emotions, etc.) in order to satisfy a limitless desire (usually for power or knowledge). Neither option one nor option two will leave you fully satisfied. So which do you pick?

Option one consists of morality and purpose but may take one human an entire lifetime to feel fully satisfied by. Option two comes quickly but at a price. What price is too high for man’s worldly desires, knowledge, and pleasure? As an old man still not satisfied with his life, Faust is willing to do whatever it takes to feel pleasure and satisfaction before his time on Earth is over. When things look bleak and desolate, humans have a tendency to search for a short-term reprieve from their suffering. As Faust’s time on Earth dwindles and his happiness declines, he decides the instant gratification of making a Faustian bargain is worth the sacrifice.

What is the price of Enlightenment? The Romantic period came about as a direct rebound to a period known as the Enlightenment. Eras, such as those widely acknowledged in literature, often ebb and flow in an action/reaction pattern. During the Enlightenment (late 17-early 19th C), natural laws governed the universe. This was the era of discovery; Newton, Galileo, and Fahrenheit made their famous discoveries and progress was unending. But most importantly, the general populace valued reason over emotion. From one extreme end of the spectrum to another, the Romantic era (late 18-mid 19th C) evolved out of an equal and opposite reaction.

The cost of the objective and technological bettering present during the Enlightenment is the loss of personality and the freedom of emotion, hence why it emerged so powerfully in the Romantic era. In the context of the poem, the cost of Faust’s bargain for enlightenment is his soul. But this all could be symbolism for *Faust’s* author, Goethe, and his interesting transition from a Romantic to an Enlightenment thinker. This is technically considered a travel back in time. There must be a cost to Enlightenment, so why make this cataclysmic transition? Goethe may have believed that the Romantics let emotion control them too much; he may have decided Enlightenment was for him because he was a realist. Or maybe, Goethe was inspired by the characters in his very own story.



Power used without conscience becomes corruption. This is where similarities can be eerily drawn between the story of Faust and the current state of the world in the 21st century. One of my favorite things I learned through my deep dive into the story of Faust is a lesson on dichotomy, meaning good and evil are not two separate things but two sides of the same coin. Now, in the Meta-modern era, we as a collective have made the decision that the bettering of technology and the quickening of pace are worth whatever cost they're connected with; we have essentially made the Faustian bargain. We've sold much of our individuality and humanism in order to see things get bigger, better, and faster.

What many 21st-century humans fail to realize is the stark difference between knowledge and wisdom. An over-saturation of hubris and ambition is not good for the Earth; when one is too prideful and materialistic, I believe they will someday reap the consequences, whether they believe it or not. With themes of good vs evil and destiny vs free will, *Faust* can serve as an applicable cautionary tale to today's ongoing technological revolution. This is not to say technology is all evil; the Faustian bargain itself is only a bargain because both options include both pros and cons. Of course life today is much easier, convenient, elongated, and pleasurable due to technological advancement, but just because it's good doesn't mean it's perfect.

Goethe may have believed that the Romantics let emotion control them too much; he made this leap backward because he was drowning in it. Goethe's transition from Romantic to Enlightenment is very contradictory to *Faust*; in the story, Faust is warned against letting Enlightenment, e.g. greed for knowledge, overwhelm and take too much control over him. Yet, the author himself decides to become more of an Enlightenment thinker. One answer to this question that I've been mulling over for a while now is that Goethe may have been depressed himself. In the story of Faust, the old man seeks knowledge and pleasure as his life without this greed is unsatisfactory due to depression. It is not uncommon for an author to write about what they relate to. This could've been Goethe's very struggle when writing this famous work. He wrote, "A man sees in the world what he carries in his heart". Thus if this Romantic viewpoint meant that Goethe's entire world would be gloomy and gray, it is no surprise he resorted to Enlightenment where knowledge and pleasure could hold ultimate purpose and meaning.

Goethe may have decided to take more of an Enlightenment stance because he was a realist. Many 21st-century humans find themselves being realists more often than not as proved by our continuous advancement. Thus, this story reads, to me, fully as symbolism or a metaphor to teach a lesson. Putting a story to a life lesson, certain morals, ideas, warnings, etc. has been done for centuries to make difficult



topics more digestible for the common population who typically may not read about such things. It is easier for people to learn from people rather than seemingly arbitrary facts or nonfiction. I prefer to psychologize Mephistopheles. It is not truly the devil who will seek you out when you feel lust or greed for material items; this is simply symbolism and metaphor to convince the reader against doing such things in real life. This psychological take is also a very Enlightenment take.

It is absolutely horrible to admit, but we are following the path that all other literary and societal eras have followed in the past. Since we've spent the past century or two in an era of constant bettering, lengthening lives, industrial and medical revolutions, and relative peace, it is about time that the scale tips and we see an equal and opposite reaction. We've done too much advancing and taken too much of the human aspect out of a human society. We are entering an emotional depression. Goethe makes a jump back in time from a Romantic thinker to an Enlightenment thinker and it is because he was depressed just like Faust. Sometimes depression makes you take the easiest and quickest way possible just to feel happiness, but I think everyone knows that the quickest and easiest way is often not the right way. We are like Faust. And though we don't like to admit it, we're making a startling transition back in time to a period where bettering is valued over personality and emotion.

Goethe said, "Two souls live in me, alas, irreconcilable with one another". This duality represents conflicting desires, beliefs, or moral principles. Faust is torn between opposing forces within himself, causing internal struggle. The irreconcilability could signify a conflict between different aspects of Faust's personality or ethics. This quote makes the grand idea of the play much smaller; there are broader themes such as the struggle between good and evil, the spiritual and the material, or the conflicting desires for knowledge and contentment. We are not doomed. Though we've witnessed the dehumanization of many once-human things, including (but not limited to) jobs and creative ventures, the fact that good and evil are two sides of the same coin can also be looked at in a positive light. Faust redeems himself at the end of the play. Though he's struck a deal with the devil himself, the story ends with him dying and going to heaven. Margeretta, the character who allows Faust to have a redemption arc, represents deep and personal humility. Through childbirth, Faust's new beginnings are represented both literally and metaphorically. He overcomes destiny and achieves redemption by repenting; after he sees Margeretta, her past innocence, and her love for him, he repents and is sent to heaven.

The moral: we have time. We, Meta-modern humans, have time yet to fill the hole we've dug collectively. Neither option one nor option two will leave you fully satisfied. So which option do I choose? And therein lies the answer. I choose the op-



tion in which I have a choice. The cost of option two is that of freedom and expression, which can also be argued as the cost of ultimate Enlightenment by the definition of modern world literature. My life becomes worth living when it is only mine. And I will find meaning in that freedom.



THE EVER-GLADES

NICO SACCO

Whoever flooded these grasslands
Forgot about us;
Forgot we were
Baptized in these
Snake-infested waters.

Anointed in the
Cacophonous cries
Of our neighbors chanting
“This soil caused us pain,”

I like to think this swamp
Hasn't changed since we got here,
But under those plastic bags
Waving with liberty,
The crumpled beer cans sing
“This land was made for you and me.”

I look at our American-marked bodies
Inside this tortured temple,
Praying that God,
With Her eyes on the flooders,
Will send a seaside sparrow
To their thrones,
To their office desks,
And their fossil-fueled jets
So that they will never neglect
The beauty of these marshes again.
Better yet, I pray for Her to flood their own forests,
So that they recognize the resilience it took to gain feathers.

Searching for Peace,
I would hold her hand
Till our palms sweat
A thick love.
And our children would steep
Their bodies with playful innocence
Far from these infested waters,
Inheriting our hope
In searching for the shoreline.



ALL THAT WAS, ALL THAT WILL BE

AVERY COMES

I am the first womb
 in everything you know
 I mark the earth in simple etches
 and palms of blood
 I am the love between mud and bare feet
 natural and native
 I am the elements from rain to heat
 living at their command
 From my touch upon you
 You are encouraged.

I serve the lights of night
 to Her I vow, I tend
 As peasants scrape their knees in bows
 when I walk, men—
 Emperors—worship my feet
 for I am sacred in peaceful places
 Wise and all knowing
 a daughter
 Goddess of the hearth in
 awe and revered you shall be.

We are meant to be celebrated
 yet the children and their father
 drag home dirt and eat your life with
 fatigue and infant eyes and time
 I see them still suffocating my casket—
 lying down over it
 none of my favorite flowers.

Try to keep breathing for me.

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IT HAPPENED LAST NIGHT

LILY TUTTLE

My grandmother visited me last night. I hadn't received any prior notice from her, nor had she made any attempt to contact me beforehand. I didn't even know she was aware of where I made my home. She looked about the same as I last remember her, but her hair is now a starker white, and her veins are much more visible. She is so very tiny, nearly skeletal with age. She has always had a slight figure, as she never really put on any weight through each of her seven pregnancies. Along with her ever-bobbed hair, she was the perfect picture of a woman who had most of her life's defining moments in the forties and fifties. She owes her nickname "pixie" to these traits, but her deafness most definitely sold the delicate image she presented. I am told often that I resemble her, but I wouldn't dare approach her with this idea. She is not a frightening woman by any means, but I am rather scared of the possibility that she disagrees.

She came alone. My grandmother only recently learned to drive and was making good use of her issued license. My grandpa never liked the idea of her behind the wheel. Whether it was out of concern for a potential accident or traditional values, I can't discern. Regardless, as their age climbed in years, their ideals cooled. I don't remember exactly the events that followed her knocking on my door, but I will try my best to recount what happened.

She looked at me expectantly, standing in the front doorway of my home. Our eyes were now level, where they once were mine, looking up into hers. I should have been more surprised to see her, but I only felt warm and delighted to see her face once again. Her face's paper-thin skin stretched to match my smile. There had been a long period of time where we hadn't communicated. As a result, I never learned to sign. My dad, her seventh son, never bothered to teach me. He once said, "It's no use."

I can handle fingerspelling and the rudimentary signs that a baby learns when their parents are concerned with the rate of their speech development, but nothing too complex. I welcomed her in, helping her take her coat off, and unloaded the rest of her winter gear. Her pale head and white hair hovered above a cardigan made of cardinal red wool, her veiny hands flattening her flowy khaki pants. She wore Birkenstock sandals akin to Jesus' and thick, woolen socks. Ushering her into the living room, a warmer part of my home, she waved me off with an impish smile. She was



in no rush. I proposed a drink with a primitive sign, and she accepted as she moved slowly to sit down on the very end of my couch. This is where she usually sat on the flannel sofa of the childhood home of my dad. It was heartwarming to see that not much had changed.

Handing her her drink, I sat parallel to her in an armchair. We sat for a bit while she occasionally sipped from her glass. She was very poised, but that wasn't anything new. I wanted to ask her so many questions at that moment. What perfume do you wear? How do you set your curlers in your hair overnight? Do you remember tucking in my dad at night? Are you proud of who I have become? Instead, we just bathed in the silence. Her face had a pleasant blankness as she stared off at mid-distance, not displeased or overwhelmed. I remember remarking to myself how odd it was that she visited that night, as I had just been thinking about her the day before. Now, however, I suppose it isn't really that odd, as I think of her often. I think of her when I talk to my dad or look in the mirror. I see her in the movies I watch. I remember my dad telling me she never liked Barbara Stanwyck and the sneer she always seemed to have, despite how prolific she was, and how often my grandma would attend her movies. We never got around to discussing her last night. I broke the pregnant air, writing a question upon a pad of paper.

Why did you come tonight? To which she answered,
I've been visiting everyone while Grandpa is away.

She set the pen down and looked at me. Her script was impeccable, despite a small shake in her hand. I smiled and nodded at her, satisfied with this, almost immediately thereafter, becoming self-conscious. What if I disappointed her in comparison to the rest of my family? I couldn't use my parents as a reason for my countenance or behavior anymore—I've unfortunately grown since we last met. One of my cousins has her Master's. Too many of them to count are married with children. Almost all of them had spent more time with her than I had. I became disillusioned with everything I'd previously called an accomplishment. What have I to show her? All I really had to offer her was the fact that we look alike.

She was looking around the room now. Her head gracefully revolved as her tired eyes landed on photos hung on the wall and mementos scattered about. I watched her very closely. I tried to gauge whether she approved of the photos I have of her and my grandpa, her husband, and of the photos of her whole, large family of nine. She never pointed them out in any way, never stopping her roving gaze. She masterfully avoided glancing at or referencing the small urns that sat above the fireplace. Instead of smiling at the photos illustrating her life, she smiled slightly at the photos I had accrued of my own thus far. She continued to peer around, until her eyes settled on



the paper and pen, her shaking hand making picking it up seem like a lot of effort.

Your sister? She wrote. I smiled, and wrote back,

Good. She has a boyfriend and a job.

I set the pen down. She smiled at that. She will likely visit them next. I felt a tinge of jealousy at the idea, as my sister spent more time with my grandma in her youth. I, in turn, was the second youngest of all of her grandchildren, and hadn't grown up as close as my sister had to where my grandparents lived. As my sister and I grew up, making the visits to the deep Midwest became an impossibility with our family's distance and commitments back home. My grandma and I just looked at each other. It had been far too long. Her unfamiliar, stale, flowery scent mingled with the smell I had always known and made me feel a tad guilty I hadn't made the trip myself, and sooner.

She let out a small breath of air through her nose as she pointed at me, then forced her right hand through her left, upwards in front of her body, then squeezed her hand and pulled it down in a short motion. She then took her right hand and floated her splayed hand in a downward, sweeping motion in front of her face. These signs were familiar, as she had greeted my sister and me with them every time we had visited her. She was being very gracious in how simple she was keeping her small talk. I understood that she said I was growing older, but my memory was failing me on the second sign. She cocked her head and widened her half smile. She wrote quickly,

You're growing older. Pretty.

I smiled at her and shook my head. It never got easier to accept it, despite her consistent insistence. She patted my hand and leaned back, reaching for a sip of her drink.

We continued to sit for a while, until she slowly stood. She began to float around the room, taking one last look at the shelves and walls laden with memories, and eventually, ventured out. She looked so feeble, doddering around. I followed her to my bedroom door, of which she stopped abruptly at. She looked back at me, with expectant eyes, as if asking permission to enter. I nodded and turned the handle for her. She seemed unwilling, nearly unable, to do it for herself. I don't know what she had planned to do once she entered, and it did not become any clearer as it happened. She again scoured the photos, trinkets, odds, and ends that were scattered about the room. She reached the closet and thumbed gently through the hangers, assessing each piece with a playful eye. Occasionally, her head bobbed in a mark of approval. She reached for a familiar woolen cardigan sweater and caressed the ironed-on 'G' patch that sat on the left breast of the wearer with trembling fingers. She turned to look at me and smiled. Her letter sweater fit me quite well. I never wear it anymore in fear

of heavy use taking its toll. She put it back in its place and patted my cheek as she turned to exit. Her hands were very cold, but also very soft.

I have few significant memories of her from when I was younger. We lived too far apart for any major moments to truly ground themselves in my consciousness, but I remember one time rather vividly, where her hands were just as soft, but she wasn't quite as cold.

I was snooping around my grandparents' house, committing the floorplan to memory, inspecting the toys my aunts and uncles used to play with—trying to find anything to stave off the perpetual boredom that seemed to come from a hot mid-western summer. I found myself in my grandparents' room, poking around in their belongings. My grandma's closet held my interest the longest, and I took my time looking through each piece. Her red letter sweater was dated, but beautifully made. The 'G' patch felt soft to my small hands. I hadn't realized that in my time in the closet, my grandma had entered the room. I began to leave bashfully, when she gently grabbed my face with her hands. They were warm and soft as she bent her head to kiss the top of mine. She wasn't visibly mad at me as she ushered me out of her room, but my parents were. They had told me not to go in there, but my boredom and curiosity were chiefly in charge of my whims, and the enigma of who exactly my grandparents were was too hard to ignore.

I never really figured out what exactly made them enigmatic. My grandma, standing before me last night, was still the mystery she was that summer day. Potentially even more so.

I followed her out of my bedroom, making our way back to the living room. Her movements were silent, the floor didn't creak, and the sofa made no noise as it accommodated her. She sighed and looked at me, and then at the clock hanging above the doorway. It was nearing eleven, I would have likely already been getting ready for bed had it been a normal night. I proposed she sleep over for the night through the medium of the pad of paper, as driving that late would be far too dangerous in the weather indicated on the forecast. She agreed with the idea, nodding. I insisted she take my bed, but she was obstinate. She wanted the couch, and I was not going to refuse her, so I left to fetch blankets and pillows.

I returned to her sitting in the same place, her eyes once again roving around the photos on every wall. She was still and pale against the darkened room. I moved to start setting up her makeshift bed, and she stood to help further adjust the sheet across the couch.

The pen and paper still lay on the coffee table, our previous writings taking up about a third of the page. If any outsider were to read our conversation, they'd likely

assume we were just acquaintances catching up, our relationship equivalent to that of two coworkers that share a cubicle wall. In an attempt to seek some closure and reconcile the enigma before she went to bed, I grabbed the pen once more. As she finished making the couch, I quickly scribed,

Do you remember being my age? Wearing that sweater?

She peeked over the top of the pad and grabbed it, adjusting it to the light of the dim table lamp. Her eyes passed from the paper to my face a few times. Her hand with the pad of paper dropped to her side, and she sighed. She took a seat on the freshly made couch and began to write her reply. She no longer had an overt sense of humor in the manner she held herself, but rather, seemed a bit dejected. She finished writing and handed me the pad.

No, not really. When I imagine you in it, I get a bit closer to remembering.

It brought me solace that we were one in the same, looking for our answers in the other. She patted me gently on the shoulder in a loving gesture and began to settle in for the night. Once she made herself comfortable, I pulled the blanket just underneath her chin and kissed the top of her head in a reciprocal gesture—doing what she once would have done for me. She smiled and waved me off. I shook a familiar ‘I love you’ sign at her, and she did the same, sleepily. I took one last look at her before I made my way to bed. I couldn’t see her face, but her wispy, white hair spilled a bit over the couch’s arm. The antiquated lamp atop the end table flickered and crackled slightly as her hand drew nearer to the string to turn it off. That was the last I saw of her.

In the early morning, she was gone. The sheets and pillows were left behind, and looked as if they were untouched from the time she’d laid down last night. I peered out my large front window in search of answers, only to find a dusting of snow. The sky was still dark, the moon hadn’t yet set, but the sun was preparing to begin its regular routine. A couple of cardinals sat in a tree, while a rabbit sniffed around the trunk, leaving delicate tracks in its wake. I looked farther to the left of the tree that stood guard in my front yard. There were no tire tracks in my driveway. Had she gone before the snowfall? The drink I had made for her stood full on the coffee table next to the couch. Next to the glass sat piles of open scrapbooks. Those had not been previously opened, and I inferred she grabbed them out after I had retired to bed. All of them had once belonged to my dad before he had died.

The books chronicled everything in my family’s history, from when my grandparents got married to the day my dad graduated from university. New notes were scribbled in the margins with the same pen I had used to communicate with my grandmother the night before. The notes elaborated on what was happening in the



photos. They all appeared to be hastily scribbled, as if she were trying to meet a quota of some sort. Perhaps she took my evident interest in her past, exhibited by the plentiful photos lining the walls, as a sign to explain the images for which I had no reference for. It was hard to make out what each blurb was saying, and despite my work in deciphering them, many ended up being unintelligible, or regarding the photos I was familiar with, simply bore false information. In quite a few inexcusable instances, she referred to my father by one of his brothers' names, or vice versa. I flipped through the pages of one of the books haphazardly, finally coming to the end. The woman was relentless in her pursuit to say anything about everything on the pages. On the final, previously empty page, she erratically jotted down a list of seemingly every actor and actress she could remember from her cinema-going days. Next to each name she listed one or two movies they had belonged to. Alongside this, assorted phone numbers lined the page. She never listed the purpose of each. The demented writing spanned many pages, and every photo and name fell victim to some description or another. The half-crazed woman I envisioned writing this nonsense didn't align with the version of herself she presented the night before. It was glaringly obvious to me that she hadn't gotten any sleep, perhaps in quite a while. I was ashamed that I had kept her up so late instead of inviting her to sleep at the earliest convenience in her visit.

It struck me as I flicked through the pages, how very cold it was in the house. The hairs on my neck were raised, ever so slightly. In her evident haste and muddled mindset, we never really got the chance to say goodbye. That always seemed to be the case with her and the rest of my family. Every time we met, and consequently had to part, we always inferred we would see one another again, there was no need for a "goodbye." It was the natural order of things until it wasn't. With her abrupt exit, she had left as quickly as she had arrived, leaving it unsettled as to when we'd see one another again—and leaving me feeling rather unsettled as well.





PEACHES AND PEACE
Solveigh Goldsmith
acrylic on canvas

SHADES OF LIFE

AVERY COMES

1. A hot blush flooding the skin

Maybe he finally asked you. Smiled a little, called you beautiful. Scooted closer to feel your warmth. You laughed, nervous. Your dad's right outside. He touches your cheek.

Maybe you messed up. Said something stupid. Your voice cracked awfully—puberty hit you hard. You wish to rewind. You can't. Your eyes are watering.

Maybe you're running. Chest heaving, sweating, a grin stretched over your face. You're cheering your sister on, your best friend. She's the professional, you're just the cheerleader. She's almost at the finish line. A part of you wishes you could switch places.

2. A leaf settling on the ground

Maybe the sun shines through it as it falls. You're walking slowly by the lake. Your feet strike the path, crunching others just like this one. A warm coffee in your hand and cool air in your lungs. It's fall.

Maybe you are playing in your backyard, young and carefree. You don't have any homework this weekend, just endless hours to play. Your dad swept the leaves into a pile. You jump.

3. A sunbeam shining down

Maybe you are near the sea. It's so hot, and the umbrella only covers half your body. The other half burns, but you aren't ready to go back to swimming. You look at the reflections on the water, dazed. You only get this once a year.

Maybe it is hidden away by clouds. The rain falls and you're tired. You've been in the car for hours, the droplets so repetitive they sound static. But for a moment, it emerges. The sky glows with an arc of light. You are entranced.

4. A woven sweater of deep emerald

Maybe it was passed down from sibling to sibling. Oversized and comfy. You always admired it on her, stole it once or twice. Eventually, it was gifted to you.

Maybe it was brought with me during the move. Boxes packed and room bare—sweater folded up. When unfolded in a new city, it will be the first thing worn. A reminder, familiar.

5. A reflection of water

Maybe it's the first day of summer. The pool is open, and you are soaking



up the sun. It's not your house, but you are welcome anytime. You wish it was your house, it's much bigger. Prettier. In the countryside. You know you are never going to get something like this, not with your arts degree. You'll just leech off them.

Maybe you're sitting on a boat. The motor is new, but the boat is old. Your family is there, and you complained but went anyway. You hate fishing, so you sit. Read a little, look at the view. It is calming, even though you were complaining.

Maybe you are washing your hands. Outside the door is loud—sometimes fun, sometimes tense. You needed a minute to breathe, look at your phone. You are fine, but your body doesn't always agree. Nothing is wrong, yet everything is shaking.

6. A wildflower stands tall, alone

Maybe you are wandering the woods. It's cold and getting dark, but you aren't done yet. The trees go on forever. You want to walk forever. That's a lie, you want to go inside eventually—you are too much of an old soul.

Maybe you're sitting on a curb. The flower is more like a weed, and you would pull on it if your hands wouldn't get dirty. So you leave it alone.

Maybe you are the wildflower.

Maybe you are made of the colors around you.



MANNY'S LAST DAY AT WORK

SAKTHIKA VIJAY

When Junia was young, she would sleep with tomorrow's clothes next to her before a field trip. It made me jealous; I don't think I've been that excited for anything in a long time.

Well, until today.

When my usual alarm rang at 4:30 AM, I sprang out of bed and straight to the shower. I felt like those helium balloons you find at birthday parties, like I had something in me that made me lighter than air. I smiled at my reflection in the mirror for the first time in years, and even the cold shower didn't seem as bad as usual. Hot water was a luxury these days, but it didn't matter anymore, because I was getting a luxury of my own.

I was going to see my family.

Tucking my shirt into my pants, I made sure my uniform of a light blue button-down and navy pants looked perfect in the grimy mirror next to the door. I hadn't seen my daughter or wife in ten years, and by the end of the day I finally would've saved enough to get the ticket. I needed to make sure I looked my best, and not show them the last ten years of war and suffering.

The war that had almost made it across the ocean to New York. The war that dropped a bomb in Toronto the other day. The war that was going to wipe us all out, but no one was paying attention.

I opened the *Dreamico* app on my phone and clocked in.

New York was the same as always, bleak and cold. No one else knew about my important day; they were all worrying about the war that was inching closer and closer. I gave the billboard of *Dreamico's* billionaire CEO a smile as I walked.

I'm almost done with you, asshat!

I was in business school when *Dreamico* was founded; we studied the story in our textbooks. Ryan Keller was a young psychologist who noticed almost every single one of his patients suffered from maladaptive daydreaming. "Suffered" might be the wrong word there—they *lavished* in the made-up worlds in their minds. In their imaginations, the ugly were pretty. The poor were rich, the lonely were loved, and everyone found an escape from their monotonous lives.

And, naturally, he found a way to profit off that depression.

My phone guided me below a busy highway. I frowned as my eyes adjusted to the



darkness, needing to close them and collect myself at the sight hidden from all the cars on the highway above me.

Me and the dozens of bodies scattered on the dirty pavement.

Their tattered clothes and blankets made it obvious who they were. I pushed a shopping cart away from me, trying my best not to roll it over anyone's hands. Not that I thought they'd feel it. They all had their eyes closed, breathing evenly. Water dripped from the bridge onto an old lady's head, but she didn't—or couldn't—notice. I bent down and gently moved her away from the steady drip.

Each had something that looked like wireless earbuds in their ears: they were black in color with a thin band that stretched across their foreheads and around the back of their heads.

The *Dreamico* devices looked like a demented crown. A crown that lets you escape to your dreamworld for \$299 USD. A crown that changed the world, making people not want to spend time with anyone anymore. Why would they? When they could rush home to their beds, strap on their crown, and live in a world that fits their every need.

I knelt down next to a middle-aged man who resembled the picture on my phone, pulled out my own device from my bag, put it on, and touched the back of the homeless man's head, closing my eyes as I felt the familiar tingling sensation in my brain. His name was—

—CLANG!

"J-Jerry!" I ducked behind the closest thing I could find, holding my shoulder as the video game controller that had been thrown at it fell next to my feet.

"If you tryna take it away from me—I—I'm not lettin' you! I'll shoot you in your fuck—"

"I'm not taking your *Dreamico* away from you!" I promised, peeking up from the leather recliner I was hiding behind.

"Y-You're not?" The man—*Jerry*—lowered the second controller in his hand, "A-Are you lyin' to me? 'Cause I swear to god."

"I'm not. I'm Manny, the mechanic. I'm here about the maintenance problem you put in a few months ago, something about a popcorn machine?"

"Manny the mechanic? That's funny."

I smiled, pretending to roll my eyes. "Never heard that one before."

"Come here, Manny the mechanic." Jerry motioned to follow him and turned around. He wore a black hoodie and sweats, and looked younger than in real life. I finally straightened all the way up and looked around. We were in a basement. It wasn't too big. There were LED lights on the ceiling and a giant Plasma TV that



made the setup look cozy. And *warm*. I unbuttoned my collar, starting to sweat from how the heat was blasting.

"I put in the request months ago, almost fuckin' forgot about it." There was a mini bar on the other end of the man cave Jerry had set up, complete with a movie popcorn machine. The popcorn in the machine was bright pink.

"All my food's pink. I don't know why. I don't think I broke anything."

"It's probably just an optic wire that's loose," I muttered, looking around again. "It's an easy fix, but I'll just replace your *Dreamico*. Tell me one thing, though,"

"What's up?" Jerry hopped up onto the counter.

"Why all the recliners?" I motioned to the six single recliners scattered around the room. "Can't you just make up a couch?"

"I've sat on couches. Recliners are for hoity toity people, so I want 'em. A game room full of recliners." He giggled like a kid, making me smile too. "I'm livin' the dream. I was scared the government was finally gonna take it away from me."

My smile faded as I recalled where I had just come from, and the reality Jerry had forgotten. A few years ago, the government signed a deal with *Dreamico*. They paid millions to distribute the device to the homeless. It was a simple fix to the problem; the homeless stayed out of the public's eye in their dream worlds, thinking about an endless supply of food or *recliners*.

"Right, they wouldn't want us homeless folk in your eyesights. Sitting on your buses, making y'all uncomfortable. Tell you what," Jerry hopped down, "Could you not change anything? Keep it all pink?"

"Why would you want that?"

"I'm honestly kinda used to it, with how long you took to get here. It reminds me that, at least in this world, I can be fuckin' warm and full. That when I wake up for food that ain't pink, I still have this world waiting for me. Will you do that? Just leave?"

I nodded, frowning a little. "Okay. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, leave. I wanna play COD."

He plopped onto a recliner, and I took my cue, closing my eyes, only opening them when I felt the light stabilize outside. I looked back at the much older, wrinkled, tired Jerry sitting against a cement pole and shivered. Reality was colder compared to his virtual world. I grabbed a discarded blanket from the ground and wrapped it around his shoulders.

...

My last case before lunch was on the Upper East Side. Richer neighborhoods always felt emptier these days. They all had servants and maids to bring them food and



water and didn't have to leave their dream worlds too often. I passed another *Dreamico* worker as I entered an apartment complex. We nodded at each other.

The client's name was Jane, and she lived in one of the penthouses. The elevator ride was long, all the way to the top. When I stepped out, however, I noticed the apartment was a lot shabbier than I expected. Sure, there was an elegant curved staircase, mahogany furnishings, and a magnificent crystal chandelier in the center of the living room. But a closer look would reveal that there was dust on the table, and the couches looked a little worn.

Old money doesn't always mean current money.

There weren't any workers to guide me upstairs, so I followed the instructions on my phone to the master bedroom where Jane was lying on her bed. The satin sheets were unruffled and perfect as I sat next to her and connected to her reality—or virtual world, whichever one it was, but I knew which word she preferred when I saw the sharp collar bones that protruded painfully from her chest.

I opened my eyes to the same room, just a little brighter. Sunlight streamed through the window, falling on a couple kissing so hard they didn't even notice me. The tall man, shirt unbuttoned, had his elbows around a youthful Jane. She held onto his hair, making shameless noises.

I cleared my throat, coughing loudly.

They groaned, releasing each other and looking at me.

"Don't you know it's creepy watching people be intimate?" The man—who looked like a Calvin Klein model—asked me, shooting daggers with his eyes. I never liked addressing figments of imaginations. They never looked real enough to me; the technology wasn't there yet. I knew Jane was the one making him say those things, so I talked to her.

"Sorry, ma'am, but your *Dreamico* alerted us that you haven't left your dream in two days. Your vitals are low, and you need food and water."

"I know how to take care of my lady, *Manny*," the man said, reading my name tag.

"Maybe in this world, but I need you to sign this waiver stating you will come back for sustenance soon. And, if not, we warned you of the consequences."

"Give it here." Jane wrapped her nightgown tighter around her body and drew a sprawling signature on the papers. "Just one question, *Manny*."

"What is it, ma'am?"

"How much longer do I have based on my vitals?"

"Five hours, ma'am. So, it's imperative you leave with me, or at least leave soon."

She nodded, grabbed the man's hand, and looked back up at me. Her eyes had



some expression I couldn't quite read. "Could you do me one favor?"

"Anything."

"When you go back, could you just give my cheek a kiss? It's been forever since she felt a kiss up there."

"I—"

"Now, go." She waved me away, turning back to kiss her man. They fell over, and I shut my eyes before I saw too much. When everything was silent again, I looked down at sickly Jane De Barrington. There were no noises, only the clock ticking aimlessly away as I sat and thought about the millions like Jane who die in their dreams every year. Who make their virtual world a reality, and forget themselves. Who have nothing left anymore, and find an easy way out. I stood, brushing her golden hair away from her face, and bent down, kissing her forehead gently.

And when I left, I made sure the door was unlocked for the gurney.

...

I ate a hurried lunch of a cold tuna sandwich on the way to my last ever case. They paid for every case I took as a *Dreamico* mechanic, and this was the one that would finally get me enough for the ticket to my family. But, from the case description, I knew it was going to be a bad one. The neighbors had reported a smell of something rotting in the home of Miss Valarie Cummings. The paramedics had found her, barely holding on.

Heartbreakingly, this had happened millions of times before. *Dreamico* argued in court that they needed their devices back and won the right to basically kill people when they were on the verge of death. Their winning argument was related to sustainability. They said they needed to recycle their products so they didn't pollute the Earth.

Ironic.

What did it matter? I watched the tanks and explosions on the Times Square screens, gulping. The war was so close on the maps that New York could fall apart tomorrow. Was anyone even listening, though?

I found the dingy apartment and walked up three flights. The horrible, rancid smell I'd come to know all too well got stronger with every step. I covered my mouth with my sleeve, telling myself I was *so close* to being done.

I'm almost there—to Junia and Katie.

I opened the door to apartment 3418 with the keys the landlord gave me, the smell so strong my eyes were watering. Something was wrong.

One body shouldn't smell this bad.

The living room was tiny—fifty of them could fit in Jane De Barrington's master



bedroom. There was rotting food of some kind on the kitchen counter, clothes were strewn everywhere, and I could hear the little footsteps of rats.

My sandwich rose up to my throat instantly, but I swallowed it back down.

I repeated my wife and daughter's names over and over again under my breath as I walked toward the almost-dead body on the couch. Valerie's face had purple splotches, and they looked like they continued down under her moth-eaten sweat-shirt. Her arms only had skin, no muscle clinging to them.

For some reason, most of her hair having fallen out made me the most nauseous.

I yanked the device from her balding head quickly, not pausing to think. I held my breath, waiting to see if she would open her eyes one last time; if she had it in her to see reality again, and what had become of it.

Her profile told me that she had been a model. I don't know what reduced her to the state in front of me, but I could only imagine. All that hard work and calorie cutting to end up bald in a rotting apartment.

Maybe her version of reality was better.

A wave of the rotten smell hit me again, and I slowly walked to the other end of the apartment. There was a bathroom with moldy counters and a mirror so foggy it didn't reflect anything anymore. And, there was a bedroom door.

I should've left.

But, I still had somewhat of a heart. I nudged the door open with my foot and closed my eyes at the sight.

The paramedics had done a shit job and didn't check the entire apartment. There were two children—their corpses on the ground next to a twin bed. One was small, wearing a onesie so soiled I couldn't make the pattern on it. The older one wore a hoodie that was way too small. She was curled around her younger brother with what I assumed was an apple core in her hand.

These children had watched their mother slowly fade away, being neglected in the process.

These poor children must have been so hungry and confused, with no one to call.

These poor children...were one in a million.

I tore the door open, running out of that retched apartment to vomit on the street. Not that anyone was around to see. I didn't let it slow me down; I continued running across Times Square as I wiped my mouth, all the way to the huge *Dreamico* headquarters at the center of town.

I slid my phone across the table to the receptionist, "I n-need one *Forevico* ticket, p-please," I managed to rasp out.

The blonde receptionist with tired eyes took my phone to check my earnings and



pulled a form out from under her desk. “Sign the consent form. We’ve had so many employees ask recently that I always have a few printed.”

I signed it without bothering to read anything.

“There.” I shoved it into her hands, walking toward the doors I’ve been eyeing since the day I got the job. It was on the other end of the cold lobby, and I didn’t bother waiting for the receptionist.

My wife and daughter were in there.

I pushed through the white doors to a massive room. I knew what was going to meet my eyes, but it still took my breath away. It was the size of an airplane hangar. There were dentist chairs as far as the eye could see and people hooked up to IVs. People who paid an outrageous sum of money to never come back to reality, who had nurses administer their food and nutrients through tubes, keeping them alive to dream, to dream about the lives they wished they had, the peace without war, and family they missed.

“Now hold on!” The receptionist rushed in after me. “Let me find you a nurse—”

“Hook up the IV later,” I told her, hopping into an empty chair with my *Dreami-co* in my hand. “I don’t want any more of this world.”

“But, I—” She grasped at her words, “Are you sure? What about your apartment? Or—what about your family? You don’t need to inform anyone?”

“What does it matter? We’re not gonna be around for much longer anyway,” I firmly told her, watching her face harden. She bit her lips anxiously as I put my device on one last time. Not having the heart to stop me, she let me dream.

Or live.

Who knows anymore?



HEALTH REMINDER, FOR PAUL

AVA JAX

His throat tickles,
 I gape I stare I
 See this kitchen as a sixty-year-old:
 Coffee in the Campbell's mug
 Sunbed morning
 Winter in summer in winter.
 The clouds are never cloudy at grandmas
 Limp lays the tongue: driest mouth thing
 Squint from eternal glare
 seeing a solar eclipse behind a droplet-size cutout.
 See doorway splinters,
 kitchen floor checkered (vinyl)
 You feel eternally lost?
 You feel eternally alone?
 Feel that your coffee will never sweeten,
 your bagel eternally stale, your mind saturated?
 A certain ageism (nostalgia) sprouts from the projected death of the self, the
 childhood self, the self that played the puzzle, the puzzle sunbed, on the crochet
 project that never got finished, on the unused dining room table, in the
 three/quarters of used skeins, in the yarn shards scattered on the used coffee table
 where plinko pegs score repetition as attention so you remember remember
 remember.

Health Reminder: Feeling Old at Twenty indicates signs of Early Onset Decay*
 Paul (Oh, how I will miss you (do you miss me anymore (please tell me
 (what) you remember (about) the mornings we walked PCH) or do you not
 remember?) because someday I won't remember) that you never set alarms.

Denial to emotionally grow
 old ages one['s soul] twelve-fold
 hold ember-ed flickering
 stones hold youth for over one hundred years,



flashes of flame are nothing
 but dissipating energy,
 pathetic
 heatless SFX

*You found page seventy-three. How much of your
 precious time left did you spend flipping here?

There are two givens in life: death and inflation and
 they don't sell Neccos or dimes
 obsolete. "Dime a dozen" obsolete
 my grandma's Botox masks the
 eye bags of generational anxiety
 her box dye masks the grey February hair
 When I get dementia, I will first miss the memory of third stage hypothermia,
 world grown slow.
 I blacked out:
 the next hour wasn't mine to keep.

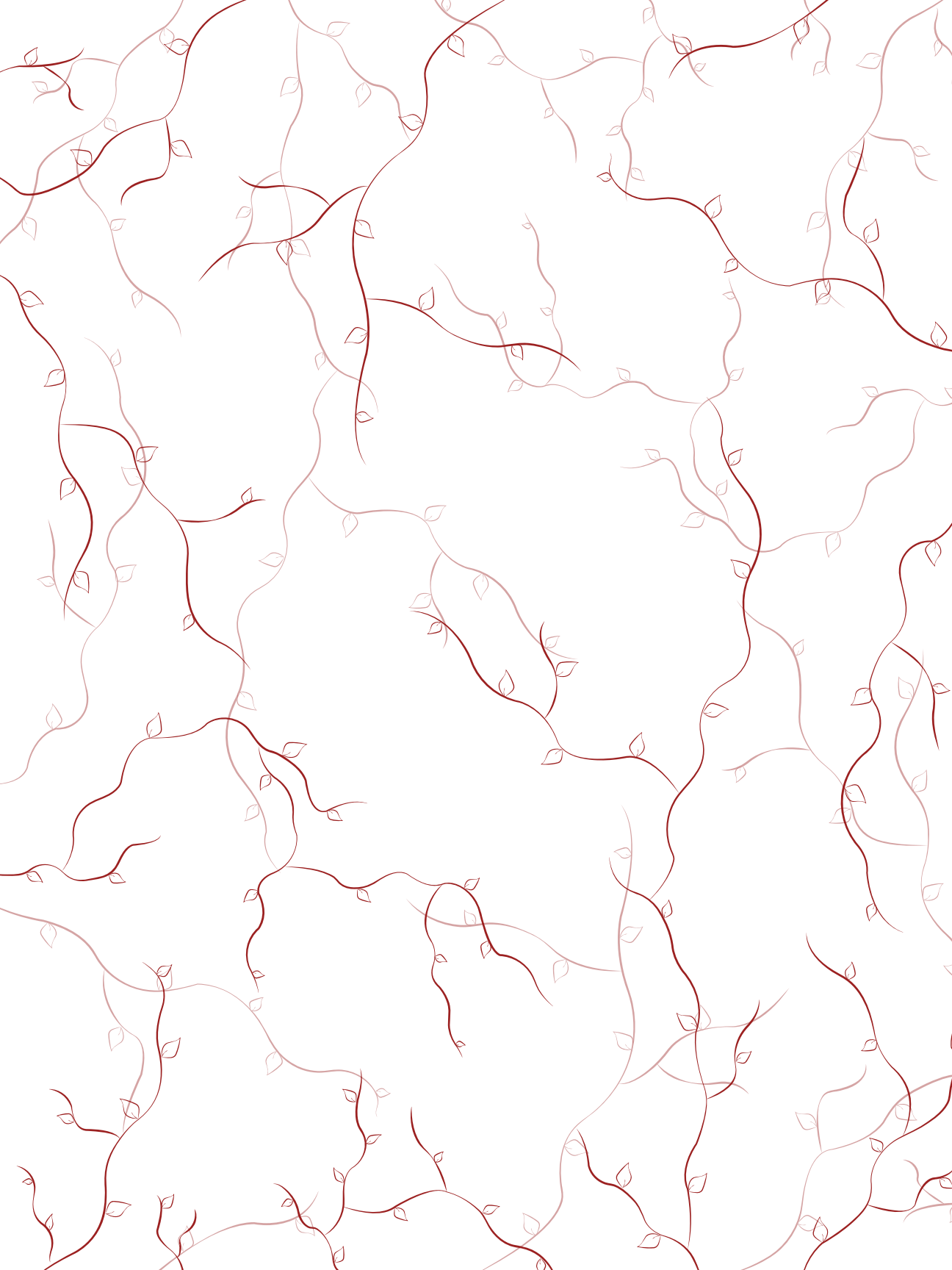


COMBO BITE

RACHEL SMALL

combo bite cheese and cracker and jam
 brown spots on thumbs can't be cancer
 can't be aging
 lost every water bottle ever owned
 gas pains
 ladybug lunchbox
 sharks are scary bears are scary the dark heights the ocean tornadoes
 splinters mulch wood chips bare feet
 chubby kid t-shirt pull
 late season flooding can't go out til july
 reformed catholics cry in cathedrals
 fake ID for poppers
 bulb's going out won't replace it for months
 elementary school bus drills hopping through the back hatch
 winter break catch-up with the gas station attendant
 always a stomach ache
 who the fuck invented overnight oats
 orchestra conductor like fifth-grade choir
 bronchitis crackle
 camera lens fingerprint sounds like car seat headrest
 hate leg day skip it
 synonyms for crying wailing sobbing weeping bawling
 middle school girlfriends
 underhand volleyball serve
 fox faces in the knots on the walls
 autofill passwords
 boxed leftovers after dinner
 every church basement smells the same
 had two tampons in no wonder it hurt





NOTHING BESIDE REMAINS

MAX PRITCHARD

The first and only time I ever faked being sick to stay home from school came very early in my educational career. It would have been first or second grade, and my parents had just introduced me to YouTube, where I had learned I could watch clips aplenty from my favorite television shows. I spent much of the day doing exactly that, and I don't believe I ever fessed up. Sorry, Mom and Dad, that this is how you're finding out.

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One of the next times I stayed home from school, there was no faking involved. The evidence was clear to see—I had come down with a bad case of hives, angry red pustules smothering me like a shell or a second layer of skin. My Mom stayed home to take care of me and, to help me pass the time, sat me down in front of the family laptop, where I logged in to my latest fourth-grade obsession: the LEGO website's Lord of the Rings forum.

Imagine your typical image-sharing social media site, then remove any sort of algorithm, friends system, or personalized feed. That gets you the LEGO Lord of the Rings image-sharing service, where posts are sorted only by recency. On this particular day, I was a frequent poster. While some users uploaded genuinely impressive or inventive creations, I took my handful of Middle Earth sets and made silly, probably often bewildering posts. What I lacked in resources or know-how, I made up for with sheer determination and an oblivious absence of quality control.

....- / ---- /-

Much of my childhood was built on LEGOs, as my brother and I spent hours crafting complex worlds and competing with our fictional LEGO sports teams. At a certain point in elementary school, I seem to have decided that these adventures had to be shared with the world. Enter Webnode, a simple website builder system, and my dad, generously patient. LEGOWORLDNEWS was swiftly established, and my brother and I had our own blog. What we lacked in resources or know-how, we made up for with sheer determination and an oblivious absence of quality control. We wrote a maelstrom of clipped, enthusiastic news articles, updated the site for a few weeks, and either got bored or forgot about it. But before this latest fad passed, I presented the site to my fourth-grade class. They were impressed, and we all laughed together at some of the very silly soccer player names.



....- / ---- /-

My parents were exceedingly kind in encouraging my peculiar childhood interests, unafraid of introducing me to technology as a way to support my creativity. Throughout my first few years of elementary school, my dad allowed me to type away on the family computer, a big white box in the basement office, and I would write away to my heart's content, expounding upon the detailed histories of various fictional universes, some LEGO, some faux-flesh and would-be-bone. I eventually stopped this habit, and though I cannot say for certain why, it may have had something to do with the time that, out of sheer childhood clumsiness, I printed over a hundred copies of some nonsensical faux-historical document, spoiling our ink and paper supplies and earning a lengthy ban from the office.

....- / ---- /-

For as much time as I spent in such online spaces, I did not find community through them. I am glad, frankly—I don't wish to fearmonger, but unmoderated internet spaces simply do not seem an ideal ground for a very young, learning child. Could I have joined a LEGO club or a youth photography group, and expanded my creativity while connecting with others? It's hard to say. Perhaps not. My parents were very busy. I was very introverted. We lived in a city where community could be hard to come by. These internet spaces filled gaps where, in an ideal world, more physical third spaces might have been. They helped pass the time. And eventually, time passed them by.

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That old box computer is long, long, gone, and the countless Word documents sprawled upon it are similarly lost. The true history of the fictional nation of Mabal is, I fear, a guest of the past alone, cut off from the present.

The LEGO Lord of the Rings site vanished long ago, as all LEGO sites do once their theme is discontinued. I could not even find it on the invaluable Wayback Machine; if it persists in some form, it is truly buried. Hundreds of my posts, comments, and absurd ideas vanished, never to be recovered. What does it mean to have spent so much time in such ephemeral places, for so many of my childhood haunts to be little more than strings of code? And does it matter, to have lost so many creations—websites, stories, comics, videos, animations, and more—or was it the joy of creating that mattered more?

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LEGOWORLDNEWS persists, you'll be glad to hear, though I am unsure for how much longer. One cannot help but feel that Webnode will eventually stop supporting



such old sites. One day, of course, Webnode itself will shut down or be absorbed into some other web-hosting service. I will venture to the link from my bookmark tab, and on the site, these words appear:

this domain is no longer in use

Nothing beside remains. Yet round the decay of this colossal wreck, perhaps the spirit of what is gone lives on, in every word I write and world I craft; those old and eager strands stretch far away.





HOME.OBJ

EVAN SCHWARZ

In his free time, he would model and render everything he could remember from his childhood home. Toys, the kitchen table, the living room rug, and the family dog were all molded out of polygons and vertices until every conceivable item existed in three-dimensional digital space. He used photos found in old boxes and on his phone to piece by piece together his house. He still struggled with proportions—and even when using a reference, he found it difficult not to exaggerate. His father’s nose was too big, his sister’s limbs too long, his mom’s hair too short, his grandfather too fat for the chair he was placed in and his shirt constantly clipped through the armrests. Light never fell right on their faces, so he placed lights like miniature suns in the corners of every room. But he tried to put it all there.

Taking those old photos of his grandfathers, the people who could no longer visit, He spent months recreating their shirts, watches, and suspenders. Socks were mismatched and he chose which pants looked better with which shirt. He tried his best. His mother, who was never photographed from the left on account of a mole, was hardest to complete. So, he guessed at how the mole used to curl and bunch up when she smiled; because, despite it all, every photo he had of his mother was those of her smiling.

His father was different. He never smiled. It was difficult to remember when he did. Laughter was often sporadic, inconsistent, and at times ill-placed like he was laughing at a joke only he heard. His father was hard to place, too. Unlike his mother, who could easily be put in the living room with her hooks and needles and balls of yarn, his father could be placed anywhere—though none of them felt right. He could be behind the grill, or in the kitchen, or behind his desk, or asleep on the couch. Instead, he—the artist—placed his father running up the stairs. Behind his father, he rendered himself as a small boy chasing him. So, on the stairs, a memory between a father and son exists forever.

The whole house was beginning to be anachronistic. He had no clear timeline of his own childhood to pull from. The color of his bedroom walls was from when he was in high school, but all the army men and Lego sets from elementary school were on the floor. The bathroom remained how it was before it was remodeled, with red walls and incandescent light bulbs. The kitchen kept its marble countertop island, which was removed to open space for the living room. The living room couch was



from when his parents first moved in before he was even born. It was a gift from his grandparents, and it only lasted three years before a new puppy tore it to shreds. So, he placed that puppy, now old, onto the couch, never destroyed. And then there was the basement, overflowing and stuffed with every poorly rendered item from memory: ceramic pots, homecoming flowers, Christmas wrapping paper, game controllers, and every chair and table that was once thrown out, now born again in this digital basement.

In spite of all his work, he didn't stop creating new things and adding more people to his home. He modeled his mother again, but younger, sitting at the table with her father, both in the throws of laughter. Five different versions of his sister, each increasing in age, were placed in a crib, at the dining table on her mother's lap, in her teal-walled bedroom, in the bathroom, and then, finally, in her car, backing out of the driveway.

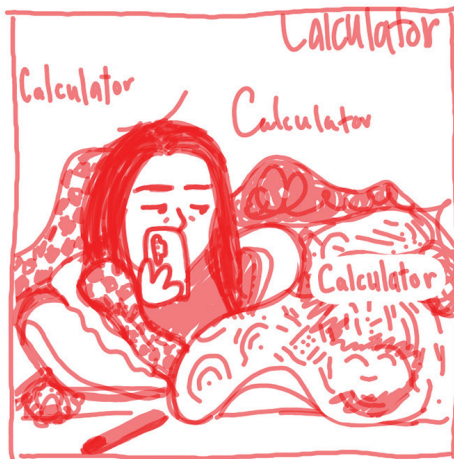
His father was still running up the stairs; he was also older and in the attic, sorting through boxes to give away. In the end, he put in his grandparents, his neighbors, childhood friends he hadn't talked to in years, and any person he could remember or name, or had a picture of.

The diffused walls of this small home were filled with the innumerable lives of all the people who had come and gone, with all their long distant limbs and pocket suns shining down on them. He tried to put it all there, and in the end, he created a living home for all those who passed by.



Calculator





CALCULATOR
Vee Wing
 digital art



When
the rain and
lightning are clear,
I sit on the clouds and
dream
of your empanadas.



FRESH DEITY

GAVIA BOYDEN

my god says,
let animals bloat forever
or at least be pink and shiny

no more arcades,
their sacrilege stinks like smoke.
and add more wolves everywhere.

mixing fabrics, fine, but wearing them
not so much. show me those parts.
these hands shaped that soft shame on purpose.

nothing cannot burn. i
considered dragons. but
instead, declare one political party TRUTH.

parrots are mute now,
that was a mistake, and i'm sorry.
pirates, you can have bionic limbs
as consolation.



LOVERBOY

AMAYA AHMED

You're fifteen when you meet a boy.

Your avatar spawns somewhere at the edge of a lake. The water is a perfect blue. Almost too perfect, like a corporate color. The color is comforting, like Red 40 and plastic nacho cheese. The boy is so pretty. His hair is dark and falls right into his eyes. You wonder for a moment if he's one of those in-game characters, someone you'll never know. You want to reach out and touch him but you're afraid your hand will phase right through.

He's swimming like it isn't fifty degrees outside. The lights above shine brightly on his dark hair. He looks like an angel from afar. A virtual angel.

You catch his avatar staring at you. His eyes are sharp like shrapnel. You inch closer to the water as if you'll short-circuit, but you know this is only temporary. The sky is marble and spotless, #071DF2 pixels against the end of the world.

You dip your toes into the icy cold water and sparks shoot up your spine. You feel blue in your fingertips and blue in your veins. You stare at him through icicle eyelids and you might see blue eyes staring back at you.

His hair glistens like a thousand diamonds when he rises from the water. Someone coded this place well and stirred powdered lapis lazuli into the lake. Your hands are chalky and blue like a merman's skin. He reaches for your hand and you let him take it without wasting a frame.

The world above the water is a little grey and blurry like a foggy day. It's always safer in a place like this.

His skin is warm and cold against yours and you feel yourself slipping and slipping. You want to ask him for a kiss but you don't—you're afraid of cutting your lip on his ivory canines. He pulls you deeper and deeper and you're not underwater or on land but something else. You think you have something real here and there's no time to log off.

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You don't remember when you started walking down this hallway. The walls are #818C92. You've only seen that color twice—the steel of your fifth-grade water bottle and the greying skin of your late grandmother.

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This is the first time he's left you alone. You only met him a month/a day ago, but you think you have something special. Your hands glitch through the walls and remind you everything exists here.

You're supposed to be looking for him. You never stop.

He's probably behind one of these doors, but they all look the same. The world looks hazier with every step you take. Everything looks like a body in a funhouse mirror. The size of the download weighs heavy on your shoulders. Your feet are cracked porcelain but they're pixels. Your heart isn't virtual but it's bendy like a slap bracelet. You keep looking and looking but WASD can only do so much.

You're not barefoot this time, but the tile floor is still white and cold on your skin. The lights above are just ice caps. The light won't cook you but it won't let you freeze.

Soft glass crunches below your feet. You wince because you can't risk starting over and making a new avatar and losing your progress.

You finally see him at the end of the hallway. He's rendered perfectly. He looks the same as he did on the day you met. He didn't leave you alone on purpose—sometimes you render at the wrong place at the wrong time.

His pretty brown eyes always get round when he sees you. They twinkle like sheer white stained glass. He tastes like the sun and shines like the moon, lips curled into a smile when you reach him.

You're always alone with him or you're just alone. Running through cyberspace with him is like playing a new game in story mode. One of you will cut and run, but you wonder who'll hold out longer.

He reaches for your hand and you don't take it because you know you'll pass right through him. You walk alongside him instead. You don't talk. You want to ask him if his avatar has always looked this way. How many other people has he met?

He takes a left without telling you. You follow him because it's getting late and you're running out of time. You're cold and he isn't, so you rely on the city's white lights to keep you warm.

•

The mall is where the water reaches your knees. You can still see the floor beneath you, but you don't want to. Everything is here and it could have been.

Everything is underwater and you can't see very far ahead of you. He's supposed to be your eyes but he's nowhere to be found.



You see your reflection in the blue water around you. You wonder what he sees in you. You're strong and tall and you have eyes and lips like his. Sometimes he counts the moles on your face.

You see him walking in front of you. It feels like a deliberate choice. He rides the escalator but he's going down and you're going up. You wait for him to come back but it takes a while.

The water soaks into your skin and makes you feel like a reptile. In another life you'd be drowning with your throat flooded with salt and tears. In this one, you can only see blue pixels. You struggle to catch up to him because the water weighs you down. Maybe it's the weight of the file or your own loneliness, but it's hard to breathe. The sharp edges of the escalator cut your feet like your tongue on his teeth.

The escalator keeps going up and up and you lose track of how long it's been. They're like stairs to heaven. Trees grow in the middle of the hallway and dirt collects under your fingernails. If he were here to kiss you, this whole thing would feel like hydrotherapy.

You see blue lights and they're calling you back home. They're white and cold but the black plastic banister is a little warm. The walls are ivory and curved upwards like an aquarium. He's in your fishbowl and he might keep you a little longer.

You finally catch him in the food court. He's so, so pretty. When he smiles you can see all of his ivory teeth. The rest of him smiles, too, and he tilts his head like a puppy. He reaches for your hand, but you step aside before he passes through you.

He looks small next to you, but you feel small next to him. You look down at him and remember you're both boys but he's a god.

You float through cyberspace with him by your side. He stops you whenever he sees something he likes. The server is accented with coral pink, a color that should make you think of antacid tablets but all you can picture is the pink of his lips. You remember that thing he does where he smiles with his whole face.

His hand is beside yours and all you can notice are his pretty pink painted knuckles. He looks like a doll.

You end up in a cafe with corporate blue tiles and no designs on the floor. People used to play dress-up games on a server like this. You can still see the faded dresses and pointy shoes. You think he would look good in a pair of blue/white acid-washed jeans.

You offer to buy him something, but all he wants is a plastic pouch full of your crystal tears. You finally ask him what they taste like and he says nothing. You assume they taste salty. He must really love you if they are.

There are stars in your throat when he leans over and whispers in your year. You want to be pretty for him too, but you've long since run out of tokens to customize



FICTION

your avatar. You're a little pale, but he doesn't seem to mind. The sun has scattered pretty shapes across his tan skin and he's perfect.

He grabs your hand and you let him pull you down under and under. You can't drown because he's the only thing that really exists.

He cuts his index finger on your jaw and you immediately want to apologize, but he smiles in a way that puts you back together.

You tell him he's pretty but he already knows. He has to.

•

You're married to him now.

You live in a perfect house in the middle of a perfect field. There's nothing to be seen for miles and you like it that way.

Your husband goes off to work every morning and you do the same. You don't know where you go or where he goes, but you always come back home.

You want to hold onto him with a white-knuckle grip, but you have to let him go. You busy yourself with planting lemon groves and buying clothes that never seem to fit you. The pants always glitch through your bones and the shirts always slip off your shoulder.

This is the kind of place where time never moves faster than it exists. Every day is supposed to be a new beginning, but you're bored. This is not the kind of game that keeps you guessing. This is the kind of place that reminds you of how alone you are.

The sky is so corporate blue and endless, and the grass is #5D6F1E and always freshly mowed. You should be happy. You finally have a nice house and a husband who loves you. But the house feels empty and you can't help but want something more.

One day you cross paths with him and your hands touch. You feel yourself slipping and slipping and suddenly life feels a lot more like Pac-Man. His touch sends sparks right up your spine and deep down you know you've always been his.

Something changes when he comes home one night. You're in slow mode, watching nothing. You immediately want to trace the perfect slope of his nose and run your hands through his black hair. He looks at you and smiles sweetly, with pink lips and blinding teeth.

He reaches for your hand and you let him take it without a second thought. You're frozen in his gaze, glitching and lagging at two frames per second. He's perfect.

You're connected to him in a strange sort of way. His veins are wires and he



short-circuits when your #A52216 blood touches his skin. When he kisses you, you can't help but spark, flash, and ignite.

He's a boyeater and a mankiller. You were made to admire his pretty face.

•

He left you here a long time ago. You haven't even started climbing the steps in front of you. You look at the shining glass beneath you and wonder if this is what heaven looks like. Heaven is a staircase with shiny glass steps and corporate blue railings. He's your very own angel that floats and floats high above you.

The AI-generated staircase leads to nowhere and you know it. It has those overly smooth visuals but jagged edges. But you still keep walking until your feet hurt. You don't understand that it's useless to chase until your bones ache and the glass eventually cracks beneath you. You have that kind of wide-eyed pretty optimism that a boy could only have for another boy.

It's really easy to need him, which is why you take what he gives you. That's why you keep walking and walking. This place is a little strange. The air is thin and your skin feels sharp. But you'd do anything for him.

Dolphins swim past you and the water makes you glitch. Tall checkered buildings tower above you and make you feel small. The floor below begins to crumble like sugar crystals in cherry red soda.

You walk for what feels like eons. Until just thinking about sunlight feels like poison. You probably only walked for ten minutes, but time pulls at your skin and stretches it thin. Everything is blue.

Like an opening screen after a shutdown, he appears in front of you, a silent supernova. He looks at you and sees all that you are. All that you aren't and all that you want to be. He reaches for your hand and you give him everything. He kisses you softly and gently. When you pull apart, you see Jupiter and Saturn in his irises. He tilts his head, smiles, and looks like a cartoon puppy.

You follow him because you're a boy wearing corporate blue contact lenses. You decide that heaven is a staircase and you'll keep climbing.

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You're not outside or inside.

You see tall buildings in the distance. They're corporate blue cold and laser bright. He's probably walking through the ultramarine tunnel, maybe looking for you. You'll

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stand here until he spots you and waves at you.

People should be watching you, but they're nowhere to be found. That's how it always ends with him. You love the way it's the two of you, or just you.

You stand in front of the tallest building. It's plastic and waxy. There are hundreds of floors and looking up at them makes your fox eyes hurt.

A snowflake lands on your tongue and it melts. It's just one. It could have landed on anyone's tongue, but it landed on yours because this is an ideal simulation. You expect to see dark hair in one of the windows, so you wait. The building is ivory white and it looks a little cold. Some rooms are lit, but the others are dark like a dead phone. He should be beside you, resting his hand on your shoulder with corporate blue blood flowing through his veins.

You think you see him pass through one of the many doors. You miss him and you miss him and you miss him.

You stand in place and breathe slowly, at two frames per second. It's definitely a connection issue.

You walk ten steps to the left and now everything is corporate blue again. Every door is illuminated by a cloud of crushed lapis lazuli. Things are dotty and you wonder if he's behind one of those doors instead.

Maybe he lives on your street or maybe in another country. Every closed door makes you wonder if he even wants to be found.

The ice crunches under your bare feet and it's perfect blue water on your skin. This world is a refrigerator. You're tired of searching. Your feet ache but you can't just stop looking. You find him in the pool. It's like the first day you met him. He looks the same, with black hair and with water pearls. He has the prettiest ivory smile. Tulip pink paints his lips and cheeks, and when he calls your name you hear a little lisp.

Somehow, there are no footprints in the snow. There's a white blanket over the poolside chairs and the palm-evergreen trees and every roof. The cold metal bars are gone because he wants you to jump in with both feet.

He stares at you with starry eyes and you jump without a second thought. You glitch and short-circuit but it's all worth it to see him smile.

There's light coming from the bottom of the pool. The water is ice cold but you burn and burn for him. His beauty is once in a lifetime.

•

You're left to wonder if it's your fault.



You're in an empty room with great crystal pillars and water that reaches your ankles. His hand left yours a long time ago and you can't stop glitching.

You swim closer to the endless floor. This world is made of spare parts like your heart. The colors are all off and the same interpolated song keeps playing on a loop. He appears in front of you like a mirage. Your heart twists and turns, and slows and reverb. Your thoughts are all chopped and screwed.

You stumble over your words like an ill-programmed NPC. There's supposed to be something wrong with you and you're supposed to feel bad but you don't. After all, you're not the one who tossed your love into a box in the corner. You're not the one who treats him like another mirage in a pair of thick goggles.

You understand he might not be real. After all, you only see him when your eyes are heavy and you get that cold ache in your chest. You're playing a game of interdimensional chess/checkers with a boy who's written into your code and whose name is carved into your bones.

You know it's the end when he reaches out to you with a faraway look in his eyes. He apologizes with his eyes but not his mouth. His words are anything but a gentle snowfall. bleaumort.com is the server he dedicates to you. It could be his first name or last name or nothing at all. Your heart would probably beat his full name if you knew it. But it's hard being five steps behind him. It's hard to take a dive when you know he's already on the other side of the ocean.

He kisses you for the last time and you're connected through fiber-optic cables. You see red and green and pink and every color in between. You cut your tongue on his ivory teeth. Then he disappears, logs off, and fades away. He slips through your fingers like that night at the lake. It feels just as icy cold and corporate blue. It feels like he ripped your heart out of your chest and left you to sew it back in yourself.

You look forward to seeing him when you dream. For now, you're just virtual angels gliding through cyberspace, and he's nothing but your loverboy.



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INSIDE THE MIND OF ERIC AEGIR

BLAIR KELLY

When I was 14 I had a crush on a girl on Discord. The joke goes that there are no straight cis women on that website—no wonder I identified her. I told her I loved her and she ghosted me.

When I was 17 I grew my hair out and two boys in my class assaulted me because they said I looked gay. All three of us were suspended for fighting in school.

When I was 19 I cut my hair short and pitched my tech startup to the investment board of a bank. The idea was to make a helmet ringed with magnets that could gently tug at the electrical signals in the user's brain and trick them into experiencing any qualia possible. I dumbed it down enough for the board to understand—my pitch was greenlit and I received the funding to open Psychic Systems.

At 22 my hair was an oily, twisted mess that frequently got tangled in my keyboard. I kept a pair of safety scissors on my desk to quickly snip off the ends of tangled strands rather than waste time untangling them. My unrelenting dedication to work eventually paid off—that was the year I put together the first Psychic System prototype.

The other staff of my company and a few paramedics gathered with me for the trial run. I donned the prototype—which came out to resemble a bulky VR headset—reclined on the sofa in the breakroom, and gave the thumbs up to the developer at the PC. A soft whirring drowned out the nervous silence of the room: magnets bouncing around the helmet interior like electrons orbiting a uranium nucleus.

Comparing my first experience to a dream isn't doing it justice. I wasn't asleep, I was somewhere else entirely. Were my real eyelids even closed? I couldn't feel them anymore. The Psychic System hijacked my senses, replacing the qualia of reclining on a sofa with the qualia of a dark, empty void with an invisible floor, all we were comfortable rendering at the time.

The world around me disappears when I fixate on my work, but this was the first time I'd ever been truly lost in it.

The trial run was a success and we kicked development into overdrive. Investor money poured in as everyone tried to claw a piece of the market we were about to dominate. The Psychic System held endless potential in the medical, tech, and science fields, but the pressures of capitalism steered us in the direction of profits. We created a video game.



It took two years of development, but the result was worth it: an open-world fighting-fantasy MMO called RELo. Players with Psychic Systems could log in and explore a real-to-life world full of monsters, dungeons, and generative NPCs. To make the game fun for everyone who isn't a professional athlete, I spent months working out how to remove inconvenient attributes of the human body such as exhaustion and pain and replaced them with the strength to casually lift the heavy equipment required for a fantasy adventure. Hundreds of other programmers created algorithms to generate qualia to be experienced by the players, everything from the raspy voice of a vampire to the sting of a gargantuan scorpion's venom. Thanks to my ingenious tech, all that would be available to consumers for the price of a PS5 Pro.

As I mastered the art of manipulating the qualia experienced by the virtual body, my back-burner project rapidly shifted from a distant fantasy to something I pursued relentlessly after hours each night. The others assumed I was just *that* dedicated to our work, but behind two passwords and three levels of encryption, there was a folder on my PC with something I couldn't show them. On some quiet weekend nights when the Psychic Systems office was empty of even custodians, I would fire up the program in that folder, don a Psychic System headset, and log into the latest build of RELo. Everything was exactly as we left it, the only exception being myself—my avatar.

Her username is Eventide. Forsaking the admin ID, she exists as a regular player that will one day mingle with others. Her model was handcrafted by me, her features feminized and beautified versions of my own, her digital nerves programmed to graft onto mine so that when I log in, I become Eventide. I become a woman.

I've known I'm transgender for a long time. I knew when I fell in love with a trans girl on Discord. I knew when I was almost killed in high school for 'acting like a queer' — the words of my principal. I knew when I cut my hair to appear presentable for the investment board and screamed myself to sleep for three nights in a row after securing the funding. But it's those nights when I take on her form that I know how I'm meant to live.

Tonight isn't one of those nights. I'm the only one left in the office, but there's too much going on tomorrow. I shut off my PC and lean back in my chair to stare at the *Matrix 5* poster I have plastered on the ceiling of my corner office. It's theorized that upon entering the Matrix, there's no pill you could take that will make you certain you've escaped—there's always the possibility that another curtain camouflaged as the real world is still pulled over your eyes.

This theory is false. I prove it false every time I log off and find myself trapped in this disgusting male body. It's a qualia no artificial system could ever replicate.



I grab my things, hit the lights, and lock my office before heading to the elevators. The parking garage is underneath the building, but I hit the button for the ground floor and walk out through the lobby. Home—the neglected apartment that serves as my place to sleep and shower and nothing else—isn't far, and I need some fresh air. There was a time when I'd rush home from work to change into femme clothes, but these days I usually sleep in the office. Crossdressing is now a miserable reminder that I can't transition.

I used to believe I would come out at some point, but it was a fantasy in high school and impossible now. Bank executives are breathing down my neck 24 hours a day. When I make a public appearance, it's their marketing departments that control exactly what I say and do, like I'm a piece on their chess board. They want money, and my mere existence will inevitably trigger a conservative consumer backlash, an opportunity fear-mongering politicians will seize to rile their base up against Psychic Systems and eventually call for regulation if not an outright ban on the 'woke' technology I created. That's not money. That's the opposite of money.

It's pointless anyway. Those same marketing people will spend hours Frankensteining me into a semi-attractive tech bro just for a TV appearance to promote the Psychic System. To pass as a woman, it would take even more effort and the result would be even less authentic. I could start HRT, and I could spend my fortune on every gender-affirming surgery imaginable, but I'm not ignorant. I know there's only so much that can be done for someone as monstrous as me and I know how I'll be treated if I step out of the closet. Pretending the trans liberation movement is getting anywhere is even more ignorant. It's pointless to try fixing this backward, savage place we call the modern world.

I pause my walk home in the middle of a dark, desolate intersection and stare into the starless, light-polluted sky. That's right—I don't need this world. I built my own, and I plan on staying there as long as possible.

The moments I'm Eventide are the only moments worth living. Shutting myself in to play my video games for 19 hours a day isn't a solution—it would only make the moments I emerge from my bliss all the more cruel. What I need is to put on a Psychic System and fall into a coma. They won't allow it—they need me awake, alert, and promoting their product. That's why I'm taking matters into my own hands.

My plan, the culmination of my back-burner project, has been coming together for months now. The folder on my PC has expanded to a few dozen terabytes in size and has 13 more levels of security. It's not that I'm dead if they find it—we'll all be dead. The media will explode over a transgender conspiracy, tossing fuel on the culture war wildfire. Trans lives will be ruined, people will die—people I don't plan on murdering myself.

Yes, I said murder. Magnets are powerful devices. They can precisely pluck electrical signals like guitar strings or rupture their target medium with violent surges in power — it all depends on who is writing the code controlling them. It's my brain against theirs.

Who are 'they'? Whoever is excited enough to log into RELo on the launch day. In other words, my hostages. The feds and bank executives won't risk messing with my world if there's a gun to the head of a thousand players trapped inside it, and they won't risk messing with their only hope of freeing them if there's a gun to his head too. If they try to hack their way in and free the players themselves, they'll hit a brick wall against my encryption, which will double as a shield to keep them from peeking inside and seeing me living as Eventide. This disaster won't be pinned on trans people, just a sociopathic tech bro who'll somehow get more sympathy than a trans woman would. To keep them from pulling the plug on the entire operation, I'll include a warning in the press release I'll publish on the night of the launch stating that attempting to shut off the servers will result in the simultaneous execution of every single hostage. The feds can torture and maim me all I want for my crimes—Eventide won't feel any of it. She's going to be a victim of Eric Aegir like the rest of them.

Yes, I said *victim*. Memories are just electrical signals in the brain and I'm already an expert in creating sensations I've never experienced. Eventide's life, formed from shattered memories of my own, exists in my private folder. When RELo finally launches, I won't just exist in her body—I'll *become* her. Her experiences, personality, and dreams will fuse with mine. I'll get to live as a cis woman — every trans woman's dream.

The slamming of a car door and the incidental body slam of the woman who parked it rips me out of my mind. "I'm sorry, so sorry!" she apologizes immediately, offering me a frantic wave before resuming her sprint into the arms of a man waiting for her at the doors of an apartment building. All I can do is stare as they share a long, passionate kiss. "Miss me?" the woman asks through a grin when she finally breaks away.

"Chloe...why is that guy staring at us?" I catch her boyfriend muttering suspiciously.

Chloe glances back at me, shrugs, and continues to ignore me. "It's probably 'cuz I'm beautiful." She offers him her hand. "Shall we?"

As he accepts her hand to take her inside, she uses her other to give me the finger. I shake myself out of my daze and storm away, my footsteps barely drowning out the pounding inside my chest.

I double back before reaching the end of the block, partially to catch a glimpse



of the couple again through the lobby windows (I don't) and partially because I can't go home. Not tonight. I retrace my steps back to the Psychic Systems office building, enter the way I came in, and storm up the steps to my floor rather than wait for the elevator. My office is the same mess I left it twenty minutes ago. My Psychic System is gathering dust on my desk.

I plop in my chair, take a few deep breaths, and then slam my forehead into my desk as hard as I can and scream.

"She's fucking trans...!" I grab at my face like a gritty reboot of *The Scream* painting, pressing hard enough to detect the violent movement of my pulse. That woman I bumped into, Chloe, is transgender. It's obvious. Her face is manish, her voice is fake, she's taller than her boyfriend...but it's been years since I've met someone so full of joy. How is that possible?

Is it possible?

I open my desk drawer, pluck a small vial from its place next to a pair of safety scissors, and study the label. *Estradiol Valerate*. How I procured it is irrelevant. It could change me, make me...like that woman. I have privilege: a skinny body type, long hair, and the money for surgery. I could threaten the bank executives with a DDoS attack on the Psychic System servers if they try to interfere. I could publicly come out and exchange my artificial tech bro persona for the admiration of people like Chloe. I could meet her, apologize for staring, and thank her for...for what?

I drop the vial, slide the drawer shut, and pass out on my keyboard. It's pointless—Chloe is a hideous woman. Eventide is cis and beautiful. She's who I've been waiting to be. I won't have to wait much longer.

Tomorrow is the launch day of RELo.

Morning light leaks through my office window to rouse me from my dozing. There's a small tug when I groggily lean up from my keyboard — my hair is tangled in the keys again. Sighing to myself, I patiently begin to untangle it as an intern brings me a cup of coffee.

The day drags on. There are handshakes, high-fives, and congratulatory slaps on the back—I'm numb to it all. Every few seconds my eyes dart to the nearest clock to check how long it is until RELo launches.

When 5:00 PM finally rolls around, I excuse myself to my office, lock the door behind me, and log into my private folder one last time. Day one players have already filled up dozens of servers—I choose one at random and activate my trap with a click of my mouse. The emergency press release warning of my atrocity is sent out to every major news organization. All that's left is for me to don the machine that could end

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up frying my brain and log in.

The first thing I notice is the feeling of weightlessness. My drab office is replaced with a void empty of everything but a small floating panel with options, the Psychic System equivalent of a menu screen. I'm not Eventide—not yet. There's one last piece of business I need to take care of as Eric Aegir.

I log into the server with my admin account and spawn in the center of the colosseum in the beginning town. Rows upon rows of seats tower over the sand gladiator arena like tidal waves about to crash into me. It's stunning, but the awe of our digital constructions has long since been lost to me. Perhaps Eventide will find it impressive.

A thousand players have logged onto this server. It won't be long before they realize they can't log off. I summon the common prompt with a thought and paste in a prewritten script—one that will teleport every single player in the game to this arena.

The colosseum fills in a blink of an eye and a thousand confused players pause whatever they're doing to stare at the tech bro with a ponytail, ear-mounted microphone, and lab coat in the center of the arena. Allowing the familiar anxiety of performance to wash over me, I spread my arms and exclaim, "Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Eric Aegir, and welcome to RELO!"

The crowd, recognizing me as the famed developer of the game, goes ballistic, but I continue calmly. "I've gathered you all here on the launch of my game to offer you a very special challenge—beat RELO!"

More excited cheers from an audience dominated by young white men with the spare cash for expensive equipment—this is going to be cathartic. "Some of you may have noticed there is no longer a way to log out of RELO," I announce. "I've removed that feature. Consider yourself...my guests."

The sounds of the colosseum become a mish-mash of applause and confused whispers. "If anyone tries to remove your Psychic System headset to log you out," I call out, "well...magnets are powerful devices. A single surge of power from them will damage your brain...fatally."

Dead silence.

"Don't worry, those around you have been warned!" I explain to the thousand pairs of eyes watching me anxiously. "You're safe. But this challenge wouldn't mean anything without stakes, so I've programmed your Psychic Systems to..." I hesitate dramatically. The final piece of my plan—without proof of my intent, eventually someone will grow impatient and accidentally murder one of my hostages. There's a decent chance I'll be the one they call my bluff on. Everyone watching this disaster from the outside needs to know I mean business. "...to execute you if your hit points reach zero. If you die in the game—"



“—Don’t say it,” someone directly behind me curses, startling me and throwing me off my game.

“—you die in...real...life.” My projected voice falls to a mumble as I turn around to face the player who snuck up on me.

Gods, no. It’s her.

My stage fright paradoxically worsens even as the players in the colosseum become the last thing on my mind, it feels like I’ve been stripped naked by the Romans and thrown to the lions. “What are you doing?!” I hiss at the woman who ran into me last night.

It takes Chloe a moment to recover from her shock. “I...was...looking for my friend,” she manages in a shaky voice. The joy from yesterday is gone. “We got separated.”

Friend. Friend? Does she mean her boyfriend from last night? Someone she just met after logging in? Someone she was trying to log in with who she now won’t ever see again?

Is her friend another trans person?

“...Sorry.” The fake apology slips out of my mouth reflexively, a verbal tic I developed to excuse my existence as efficiently as possible. It doesn’t mean I don’t mean it.

You could stop, a whisper in my head offers—Eventide’s whisper. *She took her own path, built her own life, and found her own happiness. You could do the same.*

...Or I could disappear, become Eventide now, and never have to think of this again.

Chloe’s final expression before I teleport away is one of terror. Does she know? In a moment it won’t even matter...

Friend.

That word is the last to cross Eric Aegir’s mind, and I’m left wondering why I’m wondering if that woman and I will be friends.

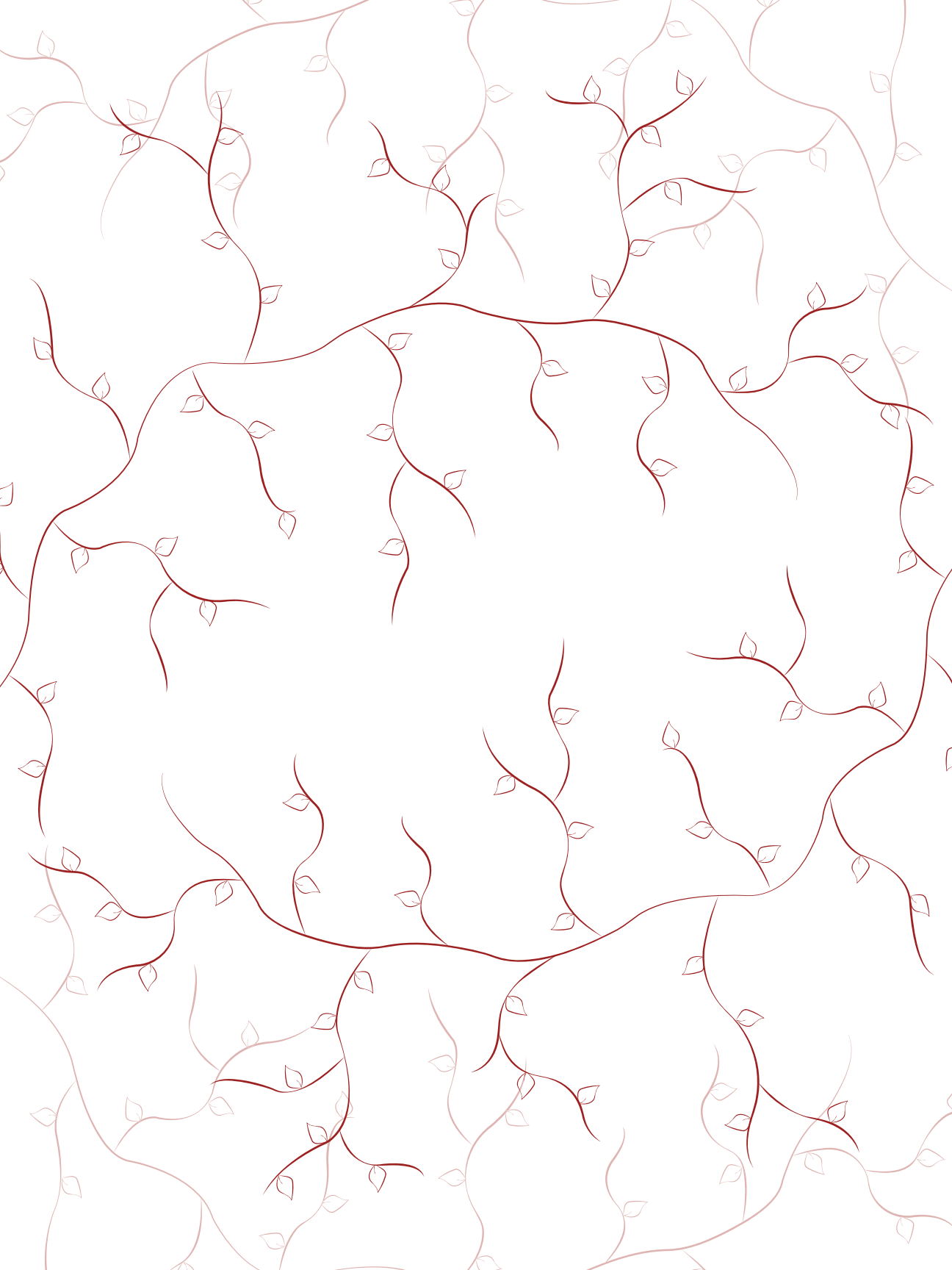


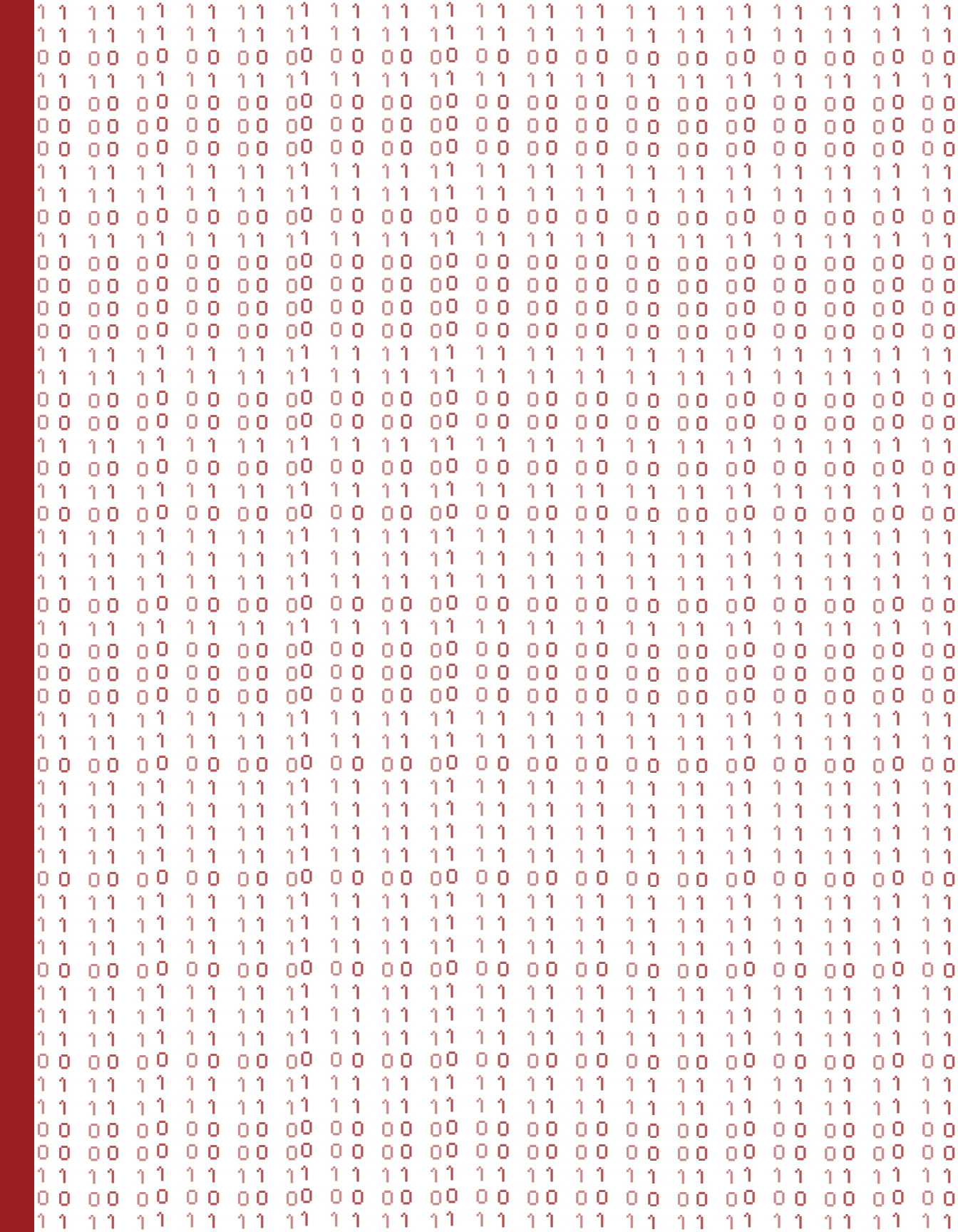
THIS BODY OF MINE

LILA COVAL

the diner my grandpa used to take me to only exists
 in foggy half-dream sequences and the aftertaste of cheap donuts.
 I remember the chairs, or maybe just the way the worn-out vinyl would stick
 to the back of my thighs in the summer
 when the overworked fan above us didn't stand a chance against the always
 open-closing door and the cigarette smoke that leaked through the cracks in
 the paint-flecked windows.
 the patrons were loud and my grandpa knew them all, every one of them with
 their beer guts and their toothpicks, and my city-kid hand
 would swim in their old country sun-crispened calluses.
 my grandpa would laugh with them, and I would
 swing my feet back and forth on my sticky leather chair until
 the woman behind the bar slipped the bill onto the table with a wink.
 I tried a donut with chocolate frosting once,
 but I don't remember the last time we went or when we stopped going or if it
 happened at all.







Amaya Ahmed (she/her) is a Minneapolis-based writer. The daughter of two Bangladeshi immigrants, her work often explores themes of cultural identity and queer love. Amaya is currently a freshman at the University of Minnesota, majoring in history with a minor in creative writing.

Ava Jax (any/all) is a senior studying cultural studies & comparative literature (CSCL) and philosophy at the University of Minnesota. In their spare time, they enjoy creating/supporting Twin Cities theater, spending time outdoors, and playing cribbage. More of their poetry can be found in zines around Twin Cities bookstores.

Avery Comes (she/her) is a freshman at the University of Minnesota studying English in pursuit of the Certificate of Editing and Publishing. She hopes to work in the editing and design of novels, specifically fiction. She loves reading, iced coffee, her dogs, and volunteering in her community.

Banner Beard is a comic artist from Memphis, TN. Currently a student at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and can be found hiding zines with hopeful messages around the school.

Bella Maldonado (she/her) is a senior SCMC major at the University of Minnesota. In her spare time, she likes to

collage, watch/make films, direct/perform in theater/long-form improv (OPEN-STAGE, Friends from College), and play games with friends.

Blair Kelly is a queer and transgender woman currently in her junior year of studying English at the University of Minnesota. She has been writing fiction novels since middle school and hopes to go have her own stories published after graduating.

Cass Bryant is a third-year student at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, studying English and cultural studies. She writes poetry and fiction and enjoys baking and listening to music in her spare time.

Cecelia Lausten, a senior at the University of Minnesota, majors in English and minors in creative writing. Passionate about writing and reading, she dreams of publishing a trilogy. Outside of writing, she works in EMS, enjoys time with loved ones, and plans to attend graduate and law school.

Danielle Gallus is an upcoming junior at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, studying English and studies in cinema and media culture. With dreams of working in film production, she writes creatively, aspiring to write her own screenplay. She has two poem publications, hoping for more as she continues to write.

DJ Scheele (he/him) is a Minneapolis-based filmmaker and writer from the small town of Hutchinson, Minnesota. He loves exploring different genres and mediums, always seeking creative and fun ways to tell stories.

Elena Laskowski (she/her) is a senior studying creative writing and English at Hamline University. You can find her work in *Hamline's Fulcrum Journal* and *Untold Magazine*, as well as the horror webzine *Dark Recesses*. Outside of writing, she enjoys biking, breakfast foods, and porch-sitting.

Evan Schwarz (he/him) is a senior English and linguistics student from Chaska, Minnesota. His work, in both poetry and prose, explores themes of remembrance, family, and nostalgia.

Gavia Boyden (she/her) is a poet from Washington. She attends Macalester College where she is majoring in English. Her work, which focuses on nature, humanity, and interactions between the two, can be found online and in various journals.

Gracia Larsen-Schmidt (she/her) is a senior at St. Olaf College majoring in English with multiple concentrations too long to list. She works as a writing tutor, statistics research fellow, and anthropology student researcher. She is president of Agnes A Cappella and a captain of the cross country team.

Josie Tregembo (she/her) is a freshman honors student at the University of Minnesota pursuing a degree in English and psychology, with a minor in creative writing. She is dedicated to crafting a variety of poems and fictional stories in hopes of becoming a professional author after college.

Kendall Gabos (she/her) is a writer, photographer, and storyteller who seeks to share diverse experiences in all kinds of mediums. She focuses on women's health, mental illness, and the human experience. She pushes the boundaries of craft, form, and expression to open conversations of change.

Lauren Wander (she/her) is an English and business student at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, graduating in May of 2027. She is currently employed as an editing and publishing intern at the American Academy of Neurology and is enthusiastic about building professional connections in the fields of publishing, literature, and media.

Lila Coval is a first-year student at St. Olaf College and is excited to have their work published in *The Tower* for the second time! Aside from writing, they're a member of the St. Olaf tennis team, love bugs, and are interested in linguistically imposed divides between humans and nature.

Lily Tuttle is a freshman from Stoughton, Wisconsin. She intends to major in anthropology.

Madelyn Valento is a senior at the University of Minnesota studying anthropology and creative writing. In her free time, she reads, writes, and plays a lot of video games, often with her twin brother, editor, and hopefully someday co-author Mario.

Mack Brusca (they/them) is a recent graduate from the University of Minnesota with a degree in English and creative writing. They love to write weird and speculative fiction and are pursuing a career as a game writer. Mack spends all of their free time spoiling their dog, Olive.

Max Pritchard (he/him) is a senior English major at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. In his free time, he loves reading, writing, performing improv, and playing TTRPGs with friends—learning and storytelling, in short!

Nico Sacco (he/him) is currently in the BFA acting program at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He is a proud first-generation immigrant from South America, whose passion for representing profound themes and diverse perspectives is visible throughout his contemporary works.

Nicodemus Zinos (he/him) is in his second year at Augsburg University. He is in the process of getting his BA in film theory and a minor in creative writing, and he hopes to make a career out of his passion for both someday.

Noah Uphus (he/him), a senior at the University of Minnesota Duluth, is currently using his art as an outlet to express his revulsion with the present state of the U.S. government. Through photography, fashion, and digital design, his work reflects his perspective on contemporary political issues.

Nora Hitchcock (she/her) is a Minnesota-based artist exploring themes of the inner child and concepts of “home”. She is interested in art as a way to capture and preserve memories using imagined characters and scenes. Taking scenes from real life, she adds ethereal elements to create mystical environments.

Olivia Hebblewhite is a senior studying environmental studies and English at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. She draws inspiration not only from poetry—all styles, eras, and genres, from Shakespeare’s sonnets to haiku to modern confessional poetry—music, dance, the natural world, and linguistics, but from their points of intersection.

Rachel Small (she/her) is a fourth-year student studying English at the University of Minnesota with minors in creative writing and sustainability studies. Her essay “The Mudroom” was published in *The Tower’s* 2024 issue.

Sakthika Vijay (she/her), a Minnesotan author, has been scribbling stories since she could hold a pen—on napkins, magazines, anything. She loves exploring nostalgia and young love in her writing. Currently studying management information systems at Carlson, her next book, *Jasmine Flowers and Pounds of Sugar*, hits shelves this fall.

Sammi Bergren (she/her) is a senior at the University of Minnesota studying cellular organismal physiology and art. She explores the intersection of science and nature through sculpture and painting. Her work reflects on humanity, biology, and the ecological challenges we face, inviting reflection on our connection to the natural world.

Sheena Vang (she/her) is a Hmong Minnesota-based artist currently pursuing her Bachelor of Arts. Her work is inspired by animated films, fantasy worlds, and the delicate beauty of life expressed through vibrant, reflective compositions. Recently, her series, *Reflection of Heritage: A Family Narrative*, was displayed at the ANAM-NESIS Exhibition.

Shenali DeSilva’s (she/her) work serves as a visual diary, capturing the zeitgeist through vivid expressions of emotion, especially those we often suppress. Using acrylic on canvas, she blends surrealism, cartoon-inspired imagery, and the uncanny, exploring themes of Sri Lankan identity, femme sexuality, and playful yet unsettling motifs.

Soleil Anthony (she/her) is an artist and student at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She is pursuing a dual degree in developmental psychology and fine arts. She is of African American and Hispanic descent and is from Shakopee, Minnesota. Soleil’s preferred mediums are acrylic paint and mixed media.

Solveigh Goldsmith (she/her) is a freshman at the University of Minnesota studying graphic design. Her artwork is inspired by her Scandinavian heritage and the classic styles of the masters. She is a self-taught artist who paints in acrylic on canvas boards. When she is not creating art, she can be found reading, traveling, or spending time with family and friends.

Vee Wing (any/all) is a sophomore linguist and musician studying here at the U. The piece “Calulator” utilizes knowledge merged from both backgrounds, as well as a touch from digital drawing.

William Farley is a Junior at the University of Minnesota studying Political Science and Sociology of Law, Criminology, & Justice with an emphasis on Policy Analysis. He is also pursuing a minor in Leadership. His creative works focus on themes of bureaucracy and institutional performativity as inspired by his own experience working in and interacting with bureaucratic systems.

